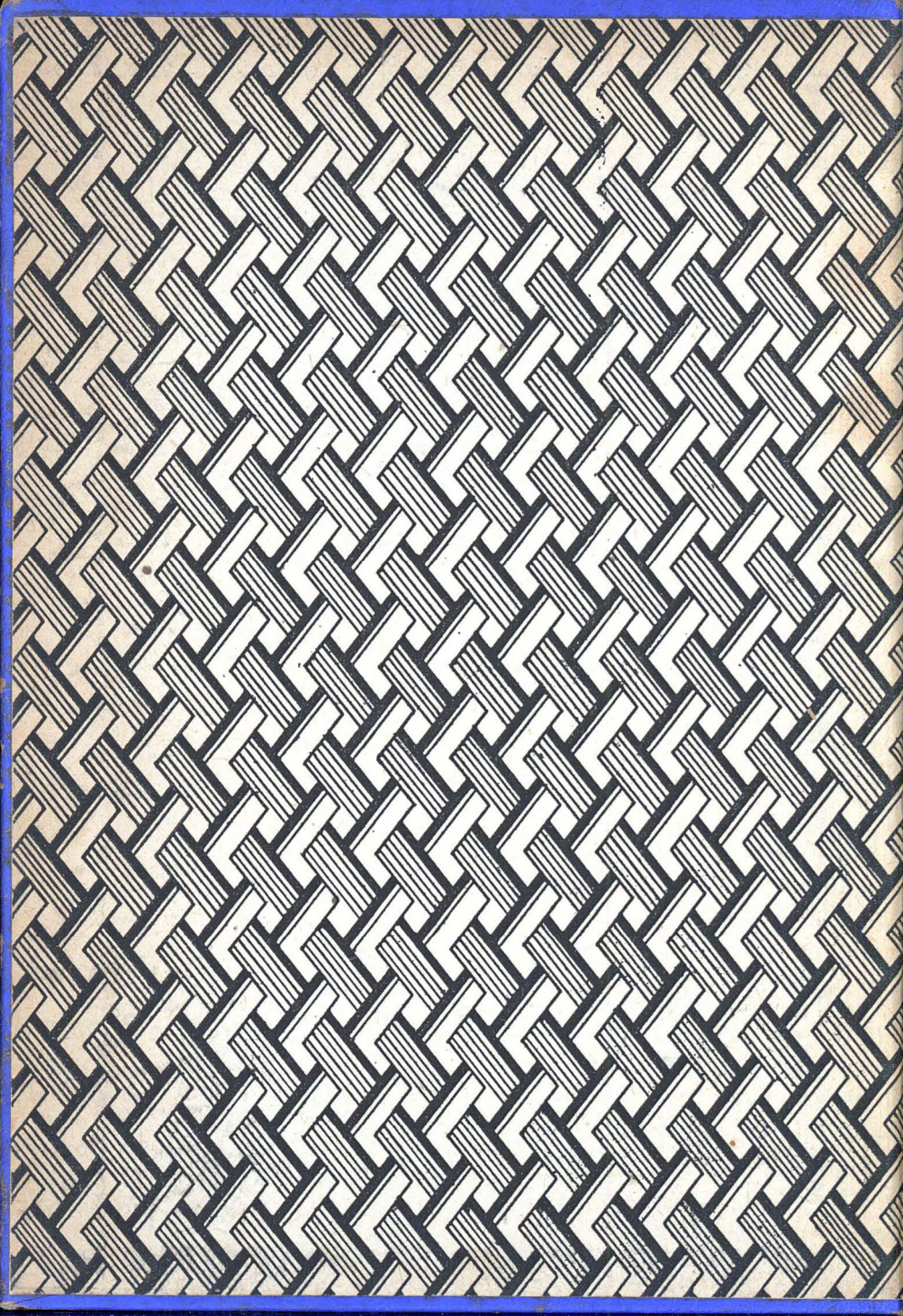
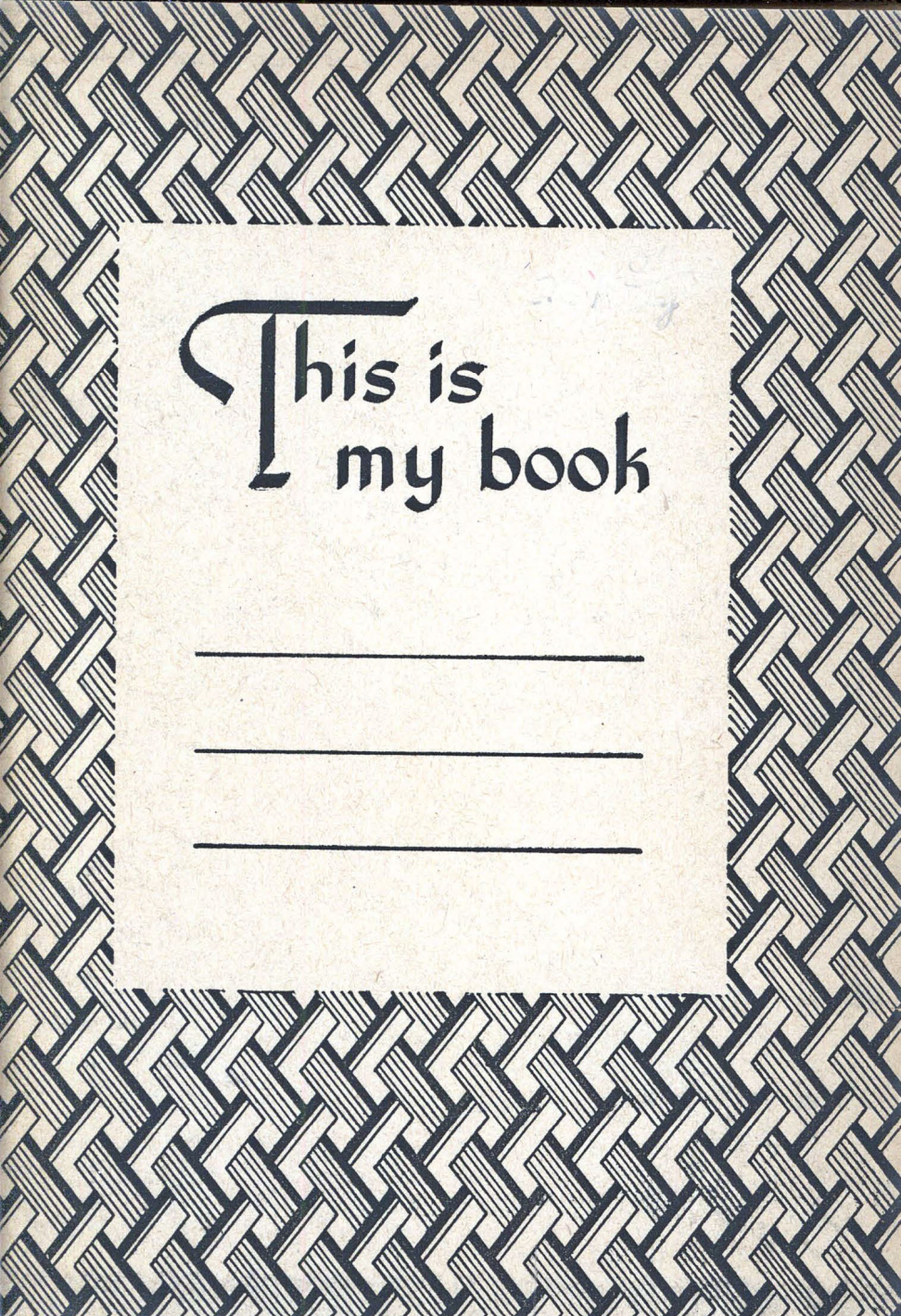
Guilt of the BRASS THIEVES

MILDRED A. WIRT




This is
my book

TREADING WATER, THE GIRL SHOUTED FOR HELP.

Guilt of the Brass Thieves"

(See Page 170)

Guilt of the Brass Thieves

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES
PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

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PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT
DANGER AT THE DRAWBRIDGE
BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR
CLUE OF THE SILKEN LADDER
THE SECRET PACT
THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
THE WISHING WELL
SABOTEURS ON THE RIVER
GHOST BEYOND THE GATE
HOOFBEATS ON THE TURNPIKE
VOICE FROM THE CAVE
GUILT OF THE BRASS THIEVES

Other Titles in Preparation

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Guilt of the Brass Thieves

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

Dedicated

to

ASA WIRT

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CHAPTER

1

ADRIFT

"THIS IS the limit! The very limit!" Giving his leather suitcase an impatient kick, Anthony Parker began to pace up and down the creaking old dock.

His daughter Penny, who stood in the shadow of a shed out of the hot afternoon sun, grinned at him with good humor and understanding.

"Oh, take it easy, Dad," she advised. "After all, this is a vacation and we have two weeks before us. Isn't the river beautiful?"

"What's beautiful about it?" her father growled.

However, he turned to gaze at a zigzag group of sailboats tacking gracefully along the far rippled shore. Not a quarter of a mile away, a ferryboat churned the blue water to whip cream foam as it steamed upstream.

"Are you certain this is the dock where we were to meet Mr. Gandiss?" Penny asked after a moment. "It

seems queer he would fail us, for it's nearly five o'clock now. We've waited almost an hour."

Ceasing the restless pacing, Mr. Parker, publisher of the *Riverview Star,* a daily newspaper, searched his pockets and found a crumpled letter.

Reviewing it at a glance, he said: "Four o'clock was the hour Mr. Gandiss promised to meet us at dock fourteen."

"This is number fourteen," Penny confirmed, pointing to the numbers plainly visible on the shed. "Obviously something happened to Mr. Gandiss. Perhaps he forgot."

"A nice thing!" muttered the publisher. "Here he invites us to spend two weeks at his island home and then fails to meet us! Does he expect us to swim to the island?"

Penny, a slim, blue-eyed girl with shoulder length bob which the wind tossed about at will, wandered to the edge of the dock.

"That must be Shadow Island over there," she observed, indicating a dot of green land which arched from the water like the curving back of a turtle. "It must be nearly a mile away."

"The question is, how much longer are we to wait?" Mr. Parker glanced again at his watch. "It's starting to cloud up, and may rain in another half hour. Why not taxi into town? What's the name of this one-horse dump, anyhow?"

"Our tickets read 'Tate's Beach.'"

"Well, Tate's Beach must do without us this summer," Mr. Parker snapped, picking up his suitcase. "I've had my fill of this! We'll spend the night in a hotel, then start for Riverview on the early morning train."

"Do you know Mr. Gandiss well?" Penny inquired, stalling for time.

"He advertises in the *Star*, and we played golf together occasionally when he came to Riverview. I must have been crazy to accept an invitation to come here!"

"Oh, we'll have a good time if only we can get to the island, Dad."

"I can't figure out exactly why Gandiss invited us," Mr. Parker added thoughtfully. "He has something in mind besides entertainment, but what it is, I haven't been able to guess."

"How about hiring a boat?" Penny suggested.

Her father debated, then shook his head. "No, if Gandiss doesn't think enough of his guests to meet them, then he can do without us. Come on, we're leaving!"

Never noted for an even temper or patience, the publisher strode down the dock.

"Wait, Dad!" Penny called excitedly. "I think someone may be coming for us now!"

A mahogany motorboat with glittering brasswork,

approached at high speed from the direction of Shadow Island. As Penny and her father hopefully watched, it swerved toward their dock, and the motor was throttled.

"That's not Mr. Gandiss," the publisher said, observing a sandy-haired, freckled youth at the steering wheel.

Nevertheless, suitcase in hand, he waited for the boat.

The craft came in smoothly, and the young man at the wheel leaped out and made fast to a dock post.

"You're Anthony Parker!" he exclaimed, greeting Penny's father, and bestowing an apologetic smile upon them both. "I'm Jack—Jack Gandiss."

"Harvey Gandiss' son?" Mr. Parker inquired, his annoyance melting.

"A chip off the old block," the boy grinned. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

"Well, we had just about given up," Mr. Parker admitted truthfully.

"I'm sure sorry, sir. I promised my father I would meet you sharp at four. Fact is, I was out on the river with some friends, and didn't realize how late it was. We were practicing for the trophy sailboat race."

Penny's blue eyes sparkled with interest. An excellent swimmer, she too enjoyed sailing and all water sports. However, she had never competed in a race.

"Suppose we get along to the island," Mr. Parker interposed, glancing at the sky. "I don't like the look of those clouds."

"Oh, it won't rain for hours," Jack said carelessly. "Those clouds are moving slowly and we'll reach the island within ten minutes."

Helping Penny and Mr. Parker into the motorboat, he stowed the luggage under the seat and then cast off. In a sweeping circle, the craft sped past a can-buoy which marked a shoal, and out into the swift current.

Penny held tightly to her straw hat to keep it from being blown downstream. A stiff breeze churned the waves which spanked hard against the bow of the boat.

"My father was sorry he couldn't meet you himself!" Jack hurled at them above the whistle of the wind. "He was held up at the airplane factory—labor trouble or something of the sort."

Mr. Parker nodded, his good humor entirely restored. Settling comfortably in the leather seat, he focused his gaze on distant Shadow Island.

"Good fishing around here?" he inquired.

"The best ever. You'll like it, sir."

Jack was nearly seventeen, with light hair and steel blue eyes. His white trousers were none too well pressed and the sleeves of an old sweater bore smears of grease. Steering the boat with finger-tip control,

he deliberately cut through the highest of the waves, treating his passengers to a series of jolts.

Some distance away, a ferryboat, the *River Queen,* glided smoothly along, its railings thronged with people. In the pilot house, a girl who might have been sixteen, stood at the wheel.

"Look, Dad!" Penny exclaimed. "A girl is handling that big boat!"

"Sally Barker," Jack informed disparagingly. "She's the daughter of Captain Barker who owns the *River Queen.* A brat if ever there was one!"

"She certainly has that ferryboat eating out of her hand," Mr. Parker commented admiringly.

"Oh, she handles a boat well enough. Why shouldn't she? The captain started teaching her about the river when she was only three years old. He taught her all she knows about sailboat racing, too."

Jack's tone of voice left no doubt that he considered Sally Barker completely beneath his notice. As the two boats drew fairly close together, the girl in the pilot house waved, but he pretended not to see.

"You said something about a sailboat race when we were at the dock," Penny reminded him eagerly. "Is it an annual affair?"

Jack nodded, swerving to avoid a floating log. "Sally won the trophy last year. Before that I held it. This year I am planning on winning it back."

"Oh, I see," Penny commented dryly.

"That's not why I dislike Sally," Jack said to correct any misapprehension she might have gained. "It's just—well, she's so sure of herself—so blamed stubborn. And it's an insult to Tate's Beach the way she flaunts the trophy aboard that cheap old ferryboat!"

"How do you mean?" Mr. Parker inquired, his curiosity aroused.

Jack did not reply, for just then the engine coughed. The boat plowed on a few feet, and the motor cut off again.

"Now what?" Jack exclaimed, alarmed.

Even as he spoke, the engine died completely.

"Sounds to me as if we're out of gas," observed Mr. Parker. "How is your supply?"

A stricken look came upon Jack's wind-tanned face. "I forgot to fill the tank before I left the island," he confessed ruefully. "My father told me to be sure to do it, but I started off in such a hurry."

"Haven't you an extra can of fuel aboard?" Mr. Parker asked, trying to hide his annoyance.

Jack shook his head, gazing gloomily toward the distant island. The current had caught the boat and was carrying it downstream, away from the Gandiss estate.

"Nothing to do then, but get out the oars. And it will be a long, hard row."

"Oars?" Jack echoed weakly. "We haven't any aboard and no anchor either."

Mr. Parker was too disgusted to speak. A man who demanded efficiency and responsibility in his own newspaper plant, he had no patience with those negligent of their duties. Because he and Penny were to be guests of the Gandiss family, he made an effort not to blame Jack for the mishap.

"I—I'm terribly sorry," the boy stammered. "But we shouldn't be stranded here long. We'll soon be picked up."

Hopefully, Jack gazed toward the nearest shore. No small boats were visible. The ferry, plying her regular passenger route, now was far upstream.

Although the sun still shone brightly, clouds frequently blocked it from view. Waves slapped higher against the drifting boat and the river took on a dark cast.

Neither Penny nor her father spoke of the increasing certainty of rain. However, they watched the shifting clouds uneasily. Soon there was no more sun, and the river waters became inky black.

Presently the wind died completely and a dead calm held the boat. But not for many minutes. Soon a ripple of breeze ruffled the water, and far upstream a haze of rain blotted out the shoreline.

"Here it comes!" Mr. Parker said tersely, buttoning up his coat.

The next instant, wind and rain struck the little boat in full force. Penny's hat was swept from her

head and went sailing gaily down river. Waves which broke higher and higher, spanked the boat, threatening to overturn it when they struck broadside.

"If we just had an anchor—" Jack murmured but did not finish.

Above the fury of the storm could be heard the faint clatter of a motorboat engine. Straining their eyes, they pierced the wall of rain to see a small speedboat fighting its way upstream.

"A boat!" Penny cried. "Now we'll be picked up!"

Jack sprang to his feet, waving and shouting. Closer and closer approached the boat, but there was no answering shout from those aboard.

Mr. Parker, Penny and Jack yelled in unison. They thought for a moment that the occupants must have heard their cries and would come to the rescue. But the craft did not change course.

Keeping steadily on, it passed the drifting motorboat well to starboard, and disappeared into the curtain of rain.

CHAPTER

2

THE BRASS LANTERN

THE RAIN dashed into Penny's face and ran in rivulets down her neck. With a change in the wind direction, the air had become suddenly cold. Shivering, she huddled close to her father for warmth.

Veiled by rain, the shore no longer was visible. Far to the right, the chug of a laboring motorboat was heard for an instant, then died away. It was apparent to Penny that they were drifting downstream quite rapidly.

"Listen!" she cried a moment later.

From upriver had come three sharp blasts of a whistle.

"That's the *River Queen*," muttered Jack, tossing a lock of wet hair out of his eyes. "We must be right in her path."

"Then maybe we'll be picked up!" Penny exclaimed hopefully.

Jack gave a snort of disgust. "I'd rather drown than

accept help from Sally Barker! Wouldn't she gloat!"

"Young man," interposed Mr. Parker with emphasis, "this is no time for false pride. We're in a predicament and will welcome help from any source."

"Yes, sir, I guess you're right," murmured Jack, completely squelched. "I sure am sorry about getting you into this mess."

Gazing through the curtain of driving rain, Penny tried to glimpse the *River Queen.* Suddenly she distinguished its high decks and was dismayed to see that the ferry was bearing at full speed directly toward the drifting motorboat.

Jack leaped to his feet, frantically waving his arms. Realizing the danger of being run down, Mr. Parker likewise sprang up, shouting.

Straight on came the *River Queen,* her pilot seemingly unaware of the little boat low in the water and directly in the path.

"They don't see us!" Jack shouted hoarsely. "We'll be run down!"

The ferryboat now was very close. Its dark hull loomed up. Expecting a splintering crash, Penny struggled to her feet, preparing to jump overboard. But instead, she heard a series of sharp whistle toots, and the ferryboat swerved, missing them by a scant three yards.

"Wow! Was that close!" Jack muttered, collapsing weakly on the seat. Then he straightened up again

into alert attention, for the ferry had reduced speed.

"Maybe we're going to be picked up!" he exclaimed.

The ferryboat indeed had maneuvered so that the current would swing the drifting craft directly toward it.

Five minutes later, wet and bedraggled, the three stranded sailors scrambled up a lowered ladder onto the *River Queen's* slippery deck. A few curious passengers who braved the rain, stared curiously at them as they sought shelter.

"Well, if it isn't Jack Gandiss, and in trouble again!" boomed Captain Barker, owner of the ferry. He was a short, stubby, red-faced man, with twinkling blue eyes. "What happened this time? Engine conk out?"

"We ran out of gas," the boy admitted briefly. "Thanks for picking us up."

"Better thank Sally here," replied the captain, giving orders for the motorboat to be taken in tow. "It was her sharp eyes that picked you up out o' the storm."

Penny turned to see a dark-haired girl of her own age standing in the doorway of the pilot house. In oilskin hat and coat, one easily might have mistaken her for a boy. Impatiently she brushed aside a strand of wet hair which straggled from beneath the ugly headgear, and came out on the rain-swept deck.

"Well, well, if it isn't Jack!" she chortled, enjoying

the boy's discomfiture. "Imagine an old tar like you running out of gas!"

"Never mind the cracks!" he retorted grimly. "Just go back to your knitting!"

Turning her back upon Jack, Sally studied Penny with curious interest.

"Do I know you?" she inquired.

"My father and I are to be guests at the Gandiss home," Penny explained, volunteering their names. "We were on our way to Shadow Island when we ran out of gas."

"Let's not go into all the gory details here," Jack broke in. "We're getting wet."

"You mean you *are* all wet," corrected Sally, grinning.

"Sally, take our guests to the cabin," Captain Barker instructed with high good humor. "I'll handle the wheel. We're late on our run now."

"How about dropping us off at the island?" Jack inquired. "If we had some gasoline—"

"We'll take care of you on the return trip," the captain promised. "No time now. We have a hundred passengers to unload at Osage."

Penny followed Sally along the wet deck to a companionway and down the stairs to the private quarters of the captain and his daughter.

"Osage is a town across the river," Sally explained

briefly. "Pop and I make the run every hour. This is our last trip today, thank Jupiter!"

The cabin was warm and cozy, though cramped in space. Sally gave Mr. Parker one of her father's warm sweaters to put on over his sodden garments, offered Penny a complete change of outer clothing, and deliberately ignored Jack's needs.

"You may return the duds later," she said, leading Penny to an adjoining cabin where she could change her clothes. "How long do you folks expect to stay at Shadow Island?"

"Two weeks probably." Penny wriggled out of the limp dress.

"Then we'll have time to get better acquainted. You'll be here for the trophy race too!" Sally's dark eyes danced and she added in a very loud voice: "You'll be around to see Jack get licked!"

"In a pig's eye!" called Jack through the thin partition of the cabin. "Why, that old sailboat of yours is just a mess of wormwood!"

"It was fast enough to win the brass lantern trophy!" Sally challenged, winking at Penny. In a whisper she explained: "I always get a kick out of tormenting Jack! He's so cocky and sure of himself! It does him good to be taken down a peg."

"Tell me about the race," urged Penny. "It sounds interesting—especially your feud with Jack."

"Later," promised Sally carelessly. "Right now I want to get you something warm to drink before we dock at Osage. Here, give me those wet clothes. I'll dry them for you, and send them to Shadow Island tomorrow."

Rejoining Jack and Mr. Parker, the captain's daughter conducted the party to a food bar in the passenger lounge.

"Hot Java," she instructed the counter man. "And what will you have to go with it? Hamburgers or dogs? This is on the house."

"Make mine a dog with plenty of mustard," laughed Penny, enjoying the girl's breezy slang.

"Nothing for me except coffee," said Jack stiffly. "I'll pay for it too."

Mr. Parker decided upon a hamburger. Food, especially the steaming hot coffee, revived the drooping spirits of the trio. Even Jack thawed slightly in his attitude toward Sally.

Sipping the brew from a thick China mug, Penny's gaze roved curiously about the lounge. The room was poorly furnished, with an ancient red carpet and wicker chairs. Passengers were absorbed with newspapers, their fretful children, or the *River Queen's* supply of ancient magazines.

The lounge however, was scrupulously clean, and every fixture had been polished until it shone like gold.

Sam Barker, whose father before him had sailed a river boat, was an able, efficient captain, one of the best and most respected on the waterfront.

Attached to an overhead beam near the food bar, swung an ancient brass lantern. The body was hexagonal in shape, its panes of glass protected by bars of metal. A two-part ornamental turret was covered with a hood from which was attached the suspending ring.

"That lantern came from an old whaling boat nearly a century ago," Sally explained. "For many years it was kept in the Country Club as a curio. Then two seasons ago, it was offered as a trophy in the annual Hat Island sailboat race held here."

"I won the lantern the first year," Jack contributed. He pointed to his name and the date engraved on the trophy's base.

"The second year, I upset the apple cart by winning," Sally added with a grin. "The race next week will decide who keeps the lantern permanently."

"Providing it isn't stolen first!" Jack cut in pointedly. "Sally, why must you be so stubborn about hanging it here on the *River Queen?* Every Tom, Dick, and Harry rides this old tub."

"Don't call the *River Queen* a tub," drawled Sally, her tone warning him he had gone far enough. "And as for our passengers—"

"What I mean," Jack corrected hastily, "is that you

can't vouch for the honesty of every person who rides this ferry."

"I'm not in the least worried about the lantern being stolen," Sally retorted. "I won it fairly enough, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Then it's mine to display as I choose. The racing committee agreed to that. The lantern is chained to a beam and is safe enough."

"I hope so," Jack said grimly. "I aim to win it back, and I don't want to see it do a disappearing act before the day of the race."

"You won't," Sally returned shortly. "I accept full responsibility, so let me do the worrying."

A signal bell tapped several times, a warning to the passengers that the ferry was approaching shore. As those aboard began to gather up their belongings, Sally buttoned her oilskin coat tightly about her.

"Excuse me for a minute," she said to Penny and Mr. Parker. "I've got to help Pop. See you later."

CHAPTER

3

A "PROBLEM" BOY

PENNY, JACK and Mr. Parker reached the deck of the *River Queen* in time to see Sally leap nimbly across a wide space to the dock. There she looped a great coil of rope expertly over the post and helped get the gangplank down.

"Step lively!" she urged the passengers pleasantly, but in a voice crisp with authority.

In a space of five minutes, she had helped an old man on crutches, found a child who had become separated from his mother, and refused passage to three young men who sought to make a return trip on the ferry.

"Sorry, this is the end of the line," she told them firmly. "Our last trip today."

"Then how about a date?" one of the men teased.

Sally paid not the slightest heed. Raising the gangplank, she signalled for the ferry to pull away.

"Sally always likes to put on a show!" Jack mut-

tered disapprovingly. "To watch her perform, one would think she were the captain!"

"Well, she impresses me as a most capable young lady," commented Mr. Parker. "After all, we owe our rescue to her and Captain Barker."

Taking the hint, Jack offered no further disparaging remarks. Rain had ceased to fall, but deep shadows blotted out the river shores. Watching from the railing, Penny saw the island loom up, a dark, compact mass of black.

"The ferry can't land there?" she inquired in surprise.

Jack shook his head. "Shoals," he explained briefly. "In the spring during the flood season, the channel is fairly safe. Now—"

He broke off, and turned to stare toward the pilot house. The engines had been stilled and the ferry was drifting in toward the island. Captain Barker stood by his wheel, silent, watchful as a cat.

"By George!" Jack exclaimed admiringly. "The old boy intends to take her in through the shoals. But it's a risky thing to do."

"It is necessary?" asked Mr. Parker, deeply concerned. "After all, we've already caused the Barkers great inconvenience. Surely there is no need for them to risk going aground just to put us off at the Island."

"Captain Barker could give us a little gasoline, but he gets a big kick out of doing it this way," Jack mut-

tered. "He and Sally both like to show off. It wouldn't surprise me if the old boy oversteps himself this time. We're running into shoal water."

Sally, evidently worried, stationed herself at the bow of the *River Queen*, dropping a leadline over the side.

"Eight and a half feet!" she called. "Seven and three-quarters—"

"We'll never make it," Jack murmured. "We're going aground now!"

Even as he spoke, the ferryboat grated on the sandy river bottom.

Captain Barker seemed not in the least disturbed. "Let 'er have it!" he shouted through the speaking tube. "Every ounce we've got!"

Rasping and groaning in its timbers, the stout little ferryboat ground her way through the sand. For one terrifying moment it seemed that she had wedged herself fast. But she shuddered and went over the bar into deeper water.

Sally drew a long sigh of relief, and grinned at Jack. "I knew Pop could make it," she chuckled, "but he sure had me scared for a minute."

"That was a remarkable demonstration of piloting," Mr. Parker declared. "Are we in safe waters now?"

"Yes, the channel is deep all the way to our dock," Jack replied. "I guess Captain Barker aims to dump us off at our front door."

Bells jingled again, the engines were cut, and the ferry drifted up to Shadow Island wharf. While Mr. Parker and Penny were thanking Captain Barker, Sally helped Jack and one of the sailors set loose the towed motorboat. Their loud, argumentative voices could be heard from the stern.

"Those kids scrap like a dog and a cat when they're together," chuckled Captain Barker. "But I calculate they'll outgrow it when they're a little older. At least, I hope so."

Saying a reluctant goodbye, Mr. Parker and Penny tramped ashore, and with Jack, watched until the *River Queen* had safely passed the shoal and was well out in the main channel again.

Before they could pick up the luggage, an elderly, gray-haired man came hurriedly down a flagstone walk from the brightly lighted house on the knoll.

"Mr. Gandiss!" exclaimed Anthony Parker, grasping his outstretched hand. "This is my daughter, Penelope. Or Penny, everyone calls her."

The owner of Shadow Island greeted the girl with more than casual interest. But as he spoke, his puzzled gaze followed the *River Queen* whose lights now could be seen far upstream.

"I may as well make a clean breast of it, Dad," Jack said before his father could request an explanation. "We ran out of gas, and the *Queen* picked us up."

"You ran out of gas? I distinctly recall warning

you this afternoon that the tank would need to be refilled."

"I forgot," Jack said, edging away. Before his father could reprimand him further, he disappeared in the direction of the boathouse.

Mr. Gandiss, a stout, pleasant man, was distressed by his son's behavior. As he led the way to the house, he apologized so profusely that Penny and her father began to feel uncomfortable.

"Oh, boys will be boys," Mr. Parker declared, trying to put an end to the discussion. "No harm was done."

"We enjoyed the adventure," added Penny sincerely. "It was a pleasure to meet Captain Barker and his daughter."

Mr. Gandiss refused to abandon the subject.

"Jack worries me," he confessed ruefully. "He's sixteen now—almost seventeen, but in some respects he has no responsibility. He's an only child, and I am afraid my wife and I have spoiled him."

"Jack doesn't seem to get along with Sally Barker very well," Penny remarked, smiling at the recollection.

"That's another thing," nodded the island owner. "Sally is a fine girl and smart as a whip. Jack has the idea that because she isn't the product of a finishing school, she is beneath notice. Sally likes to prick holes in Jack's inflated ego, and then the war is on!"

"You have a fine son," Mr. Parker said warmly. "He'll outgrow all these ideas."

"I hope so," sighed Mr. Gandiss. "I certainly do." His expression conveyed the impression that he was not too confident.

The Gandiss home, surrounded by shrubs, was large and pretentious. At the front there was a long, narrow terrace which caught the breeze and commanded a view of the river for half a mile in either direction. There were tennis courts at the rear, and a garden.

"I'm glad you folks will be here for the annual sailboat race," Mr. Gandiss remarked, pausing to indicate the twinkling shore lights across the water. "If it were daytime, you could see the entire course from here. Jack is to race a new boat built especially for him."

"Sally Barker is his chief competitor?" inquired Penny.

"Yes, in skill they are about equally matched, I should say. They take their feud very seriously."

In the open doorway stood Mrs. Gandiss, a silver-haired woman not yet in her fifties. Cordially, she bade the newcomers welcome.

"What a dreadful time you must have had out on the river!" she said sympathetically. "The storm came up so quickly. My husband would have met you himself, but he was delayed at the factory."

A servant was sent for the luggage, and Effie, a

maid, conducted Penny to her room. The chamber was luxuriously furnished with a green tiled bath adjoining. Pulling a silken cord to open the Venetian blinds, Penny saw that the window overlooked the river. She breathed deeply of the damp, rain-freshened air.

"Where do the Barkers live?" she asked Effie who was laying out embroidered towels.

"Wherever it suits their fancy to drop anchor, Miss. Since I came here to work, the only home they ever have had was aboard their ferryboat."

The luggage soon was brought up, and Effie unpacked, carefully hanging up each garment. Penny inquired if she would have time for a hot bath.

"Oh, yes, Miss. The Gandiss' never dine until eight. I will draw your tub. Pine scent or violet?"

Penny swallowed hard and nearly lost her composure. "Make it pine," she managed, "and omit the needles!"

Exposure to rain and cold had stiffened her muscles and made her feel thoroughly miserable. However, after fifteen minutes in a steaming bath, she felt as fresh as ever. Her golden hair curled in ringlets tight to her head, and when she came from the bathroom, she found a blue dinner dress neatly pressed and laid on the bed.

"Two weeks of this life and I won't even be able

to brush my own teeth," she thought. "No wonder Jack is such a spoiled darling."

Penny wondered what Mrs. Maud Weems would say if she were there. The Parkers lived nearly a hundred miles away in a city called Riverview, and Mrs. Weems, the housekeeper, had looked after Penny since the death of her mother many years before.

Mr. Parker, known throughout the state, published a daily newspaper, the *Star*, and his daughter frequently helped him by writing news or offering unrequested advice.

In truth, neither she nor her father had been eager to spend a vacation with members of the Gandiss family, feeling that they were practically strangers. Jack, Penny feared, might prove a particular trial.

In the living room, a cheerful fire had been started in the grate. Mr. and Mrs. Gandiss were chatting with Mr. Parker, trying their best to make him feel at home.

An awkward break in the conversation was covered by announcement that dinner was served. Jack's chair at the end of the table remained conspicuously empty.

"Where is the boy?" Mr. Gandiss asked his wife in a disapproving tone.

"I'm sure I don't know," she sighed. "The last I saw him, he was down at the dock."

A servant was sent to find Jack. After a long ab-

sence, he returned to say that the boy was nowhere on the island, and that the motorboat was missing.

"He's off somewhere again, and without permission," Mr. Gandiss said irritably. "Probably to the Harpers'. You see what I mean, Mr. Parker? A growing boy is a fearful problem."

Penny and her father avoided a discussion of such a personal subject. An excellent dinner of six courses was served in perfect style, but while the food was well cooked, no one really enjoyed the meal.

Coffee in tiny China cups was offered in Mr. Gandiss' study. His wife excused herself to go to the kitchen for a moment and the two men were left alone with Penny.

Unexpectedly, Mr. Gandiss said:

"Anthony, I suppose you wonder why I really invited you here."

"I am curious," Mr. Parker admitted, lighting a cigar. "Does your son Jack have anything to do with it?"

"I need advice in dealing with the boy," Mr. Gandiss acknowledged. "It occurred to me that association with a sensible girl like your daughter might help to straighten him out."

"I wouldn't count on that," Penny interposed hastily. "As Dad can tell you, I have a lot of most unsensible ideas of my own."

"Jack is a problem," Mr. Gandiss resumed, "but I

have even more serious ones. How are you two at solving a mystery?"

Mr. Parker winked at his daughter and paid her tribute. "Penny has built up quite a reputation for herself as an amateur Sherlock Holmes. Running down gangsters is her specialty."

"Dad, you egg!" Penny said indignantly.

Both men laughed. But Mr. Gandiss immediately became serious again.

"My problem is difficult," he declared, "and I believe you may be able to help me, because I've heard a great deal about the manner in which you have solved other mysteries."

"Only in the interests of gaining good stories for our newspaper, *The Star*," Mr. Parker supplied.

"This probably would not net a story for your paper," the island owner said. "In fact, we are particularly anxious to keep the facts from getting into print. The truth is, strange things have occurred at my airplane factory in Osage—"

Mr. Gandiss did not finish, for at that moment someone rapped loudly on an outside screen door.

CHAPTER

4

THROUGH THE WINDOW

"NOW WHO can that be?" Mr. Gandiss remarked, startled by the knock on the door. "I heard no motorboat approach the island."

He waited, and a moment later a servant entered to say that two detectives, Jason Fellows and Stanley Williams, had arrived from the factory and wished to report to him.

Penny and her father politely arose to withdraw, but Mr. Gandiss waved them back into chairs.

"No, don't go," he said. "I want you to meet these men."

The two detectives, who had reached the island in a rented motorboat, appeared in the doorway. Mr. Gandiss introduced them to Penny and her father, and then inquired what had brought them to the house at so late an hour.

"It's the same old story only more of it," Detective

Williams said tersely. "Another large supply of brass disappeared from the factory yesterday."

"Any clues?"

"Not a one. Obviously the brass is being stolen by employes, but so far the guilty persons have eluded all our traps."

"Have you calculated how much I am losing a year?" Mr. Gandiss asked bitterly.

"At the present resale value of brass and copper, not less than $60,000 a year," Mr. Fellows reported. "However, the thieves are becoming bolder day by day, so your loss may run much higher."

"See here," Mr. Gandiss said, showing irritation. "I'm paying you fellows a salary to catch those thieves, and I expect action! You say you have no clues?"

"Several employes are under suspicion," Mr. Williams disclosed. "But we haven't enough evidence to make any accusations or arrests."

"Then get some evidence!" Mr. Gandiss snapped. "This ring of petty thieves must be broken up! If you can't produce results, I'll turn the case over to another agency."

After the two detectives had gone, the island owner began to pace the floor nervously.

"Now you know why I wanted you to come here, Mr. Parker," he said, slumping down into a chair again. "My plant, which is making war materials, is

being systematically looted of valuable copper and brass. The pieces smuggled out are small in size, but they count up to a staggering total."

"Sabotage?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"I doubt it," the island owner replied, frowning. "While the thefts slow up our war work, the delay is not serious. Materials disappear from the stock rooms and from the floors where the girls work. I hold a theory that the metal is being taken by employes who resell it for personal gain."

"It looks like a simple case of theft," Mr. Parker declared. "I should think your detectives would have no trouble running down the guilty persons."

"That's what I thought at first," Mr. Gandiss answered grimly. "It appeared as easy as A B C. But all ordinary methods of catching the thieves have failed. Obviously, the thefts are well organized by someone thoroughly familiar with the plant. It's getting on my nerves."

"Have you called in the police?"

"No, and I don't intend to. The matter must be handled quietly. That's why I need your advice."

"But I'm no detective," Mr. Parker protested. "Why call on me?"

"Because you and your daughter have solved some pretty tangled cases."

"Only for the newspaper," Mr. Parker replied. "How many employes do you have at the plant?"

"About 5000. And not a scrap of real evidence against any individual. There seems to be a perfect system in accounting for all the stock, yet somehow it gets away from the factory."

"Have you had employes searched as they leave the building?"

"No, we haven't dared resort to that," Mr. Gandiss answered. "You can't search such a large number of workers. If we tried it, half the force would quit."

"I'd be glad to help you, if I could," Mr. Parker offered. "Unfortunately, I don't see how I can if professional detectives have failed."

"Let me be the judge of that," said the island owner quickly. "Will you and your daughter visit the factory with me in the morning?"

"We'd welcome the opportunity."

"Then we'll go into the records and all the details tomorrow," Mr. Gandiss declared, well satisfied. "I know you'll be able to help me."

Penny and her father were tired, and shortly after ten o'clock went to their rooms. Mr. Gandiss' problem interested them, though they felt that he had greatly overrated their ability in believing they could contribute to a solution of the mystery.

"I'm not certain I care to become involved," Mr. Parker confessed to Penny, who in robe and slippers had tiptoed into his room to say goodnight.

"But Dad, we can't decently refuse," Penny re-

turned eagerly. "I think it would be fun to try to catch those thieves!"

"Well, we'll see," yawned Mr. Parker. "Skip back to bed now."

Penny read a magazine for an hour, and then switched off the light on the night table. Snuggling down under the silk coverlet, she slept soundly.

Sometime later, she found herself suddenly awake, though what had aroused her she could not guess. The room remained dark, but the first glimmer of dawn slanted through the Venetian blinds.

Penny rolled over and settled down for another snooze. Then she heard a disturbing sound. The wooden blinds were rattling ever so slightly, yet there was no breeze. Next her startled gaze focused upon a hand which had been thrust through the window to stealthily push the blinds aside.

A leg appeared over the sill, and a dark figure stepped boldly into the bedroom.

Terrified, Penny sat up so quickly that the bed springs creaked a loud protest. Instantly the intruder turned his face toward her.

"Keep quiet!" he hissed.

With mingled relief and indignation, Penny recognized Jack. He tiptoed to the bed.

"Now don't let out a yip," he cautioned. "I don't want Mom or my father to hear."

"Well, of all the nerve!" Penny exclaimed indig-

nantly. "Is this my room or is it your private runway?"

"Don't go off the deep end. All the doors are locked and the servants have orders not to let me in if I am late."

"It's nearly morning," said Penny, hiding a yawn. "Where in the world did you go?"

"Town," Jack answered briefly.

Penny began to understand the cause of Mr. Gandiss' worry about his son.

"Now don't give me that 'holier than Thou' line," Jack said, anticipating a lecture. "I'm not going to the dogs nearly as fast as the old man believes. He's an old fossil."

"You shouldn't speak of your father that way," Penny replied. "After all, hasn't he given you everything?"

"He tries to keep me tied to his apron strings." Jack sat down on the bed, stretching luxuriously. "Mom isn't quite so unreasonable."

"Both of your parents seem like wonderful people to me."

"Maybe I know 'em better than you do," Jack grinned. "Oh, they're okay, in their way. Don't get me wrong. But my father always is trying to shove me around. If it hadn't been for your open window, I'd have had to sleep out in the cold."

"And it would have served you right too! You

went off without staying a word to your parents, and worried them half to death. Now kindly remove your carcass from this bed!"

"Oh, cut the lecture," Jack pleaded, getting up and yawning again. "Gosh, I'm hungry. Let's find something to eat in the kitchen."

"Let's not," retorted Penny, giving him a shove. "Clear out of here, or I'll heave the lamp at you!"

"Oh, all right, kitten," he said soothingly. "I'm going. Remember your promise not to go wagging your tongue about what time I got in."

"I didn't promise a thing!"

"But you will," chuckled Jack confidently. "See you in the morning."

He tiptoed from the room, and Penny heard him stirring about in the kitchen. The refrigerator door opened and closed several times. Then at last all became quiet again.

"The conceited egg!" she thought irritably. "Now I'm so thoroughly awakened, I can't possibly go back to sleep."

Tossing about for a few minutes, she finally arose and dressed. Deciding to take an early morning walk about the island, she moved noiselessly through the house to the kitchen.

There she paused to note the wreckage Jack had left in his wake. The refrigerator door was wide open. As she closed it, she saw dishes of salad, chicken,

pickles and tomatoes in a depleted state. Jack had topped off his feast with a quart of milk, and the bottle, together with a pile of chicken bones, cluttered the sink.

A step was heard in the dining room. Startled, Penny turned quickly around, but it was too late to retreat.

The Gandiss' cook stood in the kitchen doorway, eyeing her with obvious disapproval.

CHAPTER

5

UNWANTED ADVICE

"JUST HAVING an early morning snack?" Mrs. Bevens, the cook, inquired.

"Why, no," stammered Penny. "That is—." Confronted with the empty milk bottle, a chicken skeleton, and two empty food dishes, it seemed futile to deny such incriminating evidence. Though tempted to speak of Jack, she decided it would not be sporting of her.

"Young people have such healthy appetites," the cook sighed. "I had counted on that chicken for luncheon. But never mind. I can send to the mainland for something else."

Feeling like a criminal, Penny fled to her room.

"I could tar and feather Jack!" she thought furiously. "If he ever gets up, I'll make him explain to the cook."

The breakfast bell rang at eight o'clock. When Penny joined the group downstairs, she was surprised

to see Jack in a fresh suit, looking little the worse for having been out all night.

"What time did you get in, Jack?" his father inquired pointedly.

"Well, now I just don't remember," the boy answered, winking at Penny.

"*How* did you get in, might be a better question. If I recollect correctly, all of the doors were locked last night at midnight."

Penny, decidedly uncomfortable, would have confessed her part, had not Jack sent her a warning glance. As everyone went in to breakfast, the matter was allowed to rest.

Ravenously hungry, Penny ate two waffles and several pieces of bacon. Observing the butler's amazed gaze upon her, she guessed that the cook had told him of the chicken episode.

Breakfast over, she managed to get Jack into a corner.

"Listen," she said indignantly, "why don't you tell your parents exactly what happened. Mrs. Bevens thinks I ate up all the chicken."

"Does she?" Jack chuckled. "That's rich! Don't you dare give me away!"

"You give me a pain!" Penny retorted, losing all patience. "If I weren't a guest in your house, I think I might slug you!"

"Go ahead," Jack invited, unruffled. "You're a

little spitfire just like Sally! Oh, by the way, how about a trial run in the *Spindrift?*"

"Not the new sailboat?"

Jack nodded, his face animated. "She was delivered yesterday and is smooth as silk. The mast may need to be stepped back a notch or so, but otherwise she's perfect for the race. Want to sail with me?"

"I'd love to," Penny said, forgetting her resentment.

Hand in hand they ran down the path to the docks. *The Spindrift*, built to Mr. Gandiss' specifications, at a cost of nearly two thousand dollars, was a magnificent boat. Sixteen feet from bow to stern, its new coat of white was satin smooth, and its metalwork gleamed in the morning sun.

"She's fast," Jack declared proudly. "Sally Barker hasn't a chance to win that race!"

"Will she have a new boat?"

"No, the captain can't afford it. She'll have to sail *Cat's Paw* again." In all honesty, Jack added: "It's a good boat though. Captain Barker built it himself."

Together they put up the snowy white mainsail, and Jack shoved off from the dock. Heading upstream, the boy demonstrated how close to the wind the *Spindrift* would sail.

"She's good in a light breeze too," he declared. "No matter what sort of weather we get for the race, I figure I'll win."

"There's an old saying that pride goeth before a

fall," Penny reminded him. "Also one about not counting your chickens."

"Poultry never interested me," Jack grinned, his eyes on the peak of the mainsail. "I'll win that brass lantern trophy from Sally if it's the last act of my life."

Penny, who had sailed a boat for several seasons in Riverview, hoped that Jack would offer her the tiller. Oblivious to her hints, he kept the *Spindrift* heeling along so fast that water fairly boiled behind the rudder. Jack was a good sailor and knew it.

Observing the *River Queen* plying her usual course, the boy deliberately steered to cross her path. As Penny well knew, by rules of navigation the ferryboat was compelled to watch out for the smaller boat. With apparent unconcern, Jack forced the *Queen* to change courses.

As the boats passed fairly close to each other, Sally appeared at the railing. A bandana handkerchief covered her hair and she wore slacks and a white sweater. Watching the *Spindrift* with concentration, she cupped her hands and shouted:

"If you sail near Hat Island, better be careful, Jack! The river level is dropping fast this morning. There's a shoal—"

"When I need advice from you, I'll ask for it!" Jack replied furiously, turning his back to the ferry.

Sally waved derisively and disappeared into the pilot house.

"Why aren't you two nicer to each other?" Penny demanded suddenly. "It seems to me you deliberately try to wave a red flag at her. For instance, sailing across the *River Queen's* bow—"

"Oh, I just intend to show Sally she can't push me around! Let's go home."

Suddenly tiring of the sport, Jack let out the mainsail, and the boat glided swiftly before the wind. Approaching a small island tangled with bushes and vines, Penny noted that the water was growing shallow. She called Jack's attention to the muddy bottom beneath them.

"Oh, it's deep enough through here," the boy responded carelessly. "I make the passage every day."

"What island are we passing?"

"Hat. The water always is shoal here. Just sit tight and quit scowling at me."

"I didn't know I was," Penny said, sinking back into the cushions.

The *Spindrift* gently grazed bottom. Dismayed, Penny straightened up, peering over the side. The boat was running hard into a mud bank.

"About! Bring her about, Jack!" she cried before she considered how he might take the uninvited advice.

"The water is deep enough here," Jack answered

stubbornly. "It's only a tiny shoal. We'll sail through it easily."

Penny said nothing more, though her lips drew into a tight line.

Jack held to his course. For a moment it appeared that the boat would glide over the shoal into deeper water. Then the next instant they were hard aground. The sail began to flap.

"We're stuck like a turtle in a puddle," commented Penny, not without satisfaction.

"We'll get off!" Jack cried, seizing a paddle from the bottom of the boat.

He tried to shove away from the shoal, but the wind against the big sail resisted his strength.

"You'll never get off that way," Penny said calmly. "Why not take down the sail? We're hard aground now."

Jack glared, and looked as if he would like to heave the paddle at her.

"Okay," he growled.

Winds which came from the head of Hat Island were tricky. Before Jack could lower the sail, the breeze, shifting slightly, struck the expanse of canvas from directly aft.

"Look out, Jack!" Penny screamed a warning. "We're going to jibe!"

Jack ducked but not quickly enough. With great violence, the wind swung the sail over to the opposite

side of the boat, the boom striking him a stunning blow on the back of the head.

Moaning with pain, he slumped into the bottom of the *Spindrift*.

CHAPTER

6

SWEEPER JOE INFORMS

ALARMED FOR Jack, Penny scrambled over a seat to his side. He had been struck a hard blow by the swinging boom and there was a tiny jagged cut just behind his ear. A glance satisfied the girl that he was not seriously injured and that she could do nothing for him at the moment.

Turning her attention to the sail which was showing an inclination to slam over again, she quickly pulled it in and lowered it to the deck.

By then Jack had opened his eyes. His bewildered gaze rested upon her, and he rubbed his head.

"You—" he mumbled, raising on an elbow.

Penny firmly pushed him back. "Lie still!" she commanded.

Seizing the paddle, she tried to shove the boat backwards off the mud bank. Her best efforts would not move it an inch.

Slowly Jack raised himself to a sitting position. He

rubbed his head. Bewilderment changed to a look of comprehension.

"I'm okay now," he said huskily. "We're hard aground, aren't we?"

"Solid as a rock," agreed Penny, wiping perspiration from her forehead. "Any ideas?"

"I'll get out and push."

"You're not strong enough. You took a nasty blow on the head."

Had not Jack looked so thoroughly miserable, Penny might have been tempted to adopt an "I told you so" attitude. There had been no excuse for running aground. Sally Barker had warned them about the shoal, and Jack deliberately had disregarded her advice.

"I guess it was my fault," Jack mumbled, the words coming with difficulty. "The water was deep enough here yesterday. I was so sure—"

His eyes, like those of an abused puppy, appealed to her for sympathy. Suddenly, Penny's resentment vanished and she felt sorry for Jack.

"Never mind," she said kindly. "We'll get off somehow. If necessary, I can swim to Shadow Island for help."

"It won't be necessary." Jack pulled off shoes and socks, and rolled up his slacks above his knees. "I got us into this, and I'll get us out. Just sit tight."

Despite Penny's protests, he swung over the side,

into the shallow water. Applying his shoulder to the *Spindrift's* bow, he pushed with all his strength. Penny dug into the mud with the paddle.

The boat groaned and clung fast to the shoal. Then inch by inch it began to move backwards.

"We're off!" Penny cried jubilantly.

Jack pushed until the *Spindrift* was safely away from the shoal. Wet and plastered with mud, he scrambled aboard.

"No use putting up the sail," he said gloomily. "The centerboard is damaged. When we went aground I should have pulled it up, but things happened so fast I didn't think of it."

"Can't it be repaired?"

"Oh, sure, but it means hauling the boat out of water for several days. And the race will be held in a week. I'll have no chance to practice."

"It's a bad break," Penny said sympathetically. "Perhaps the centerboard isn't much damaged."

They paddled to the Shadow Island dock. There with the help of the Gandiss chauffeur, Jack tied ropes under the bottom of the *Spindrift* and by means of a hoist and crane, lifted the boat a few feet out of water. A piece had been broken from the centerboard and the bottom was so badly scratched that it would have to be repainted before the race.

"I call this wretched luck!" Jack fumed. "It will take days to repair and repaint the *Spindrift*."

The accident had a subduing effect up on the boy, and the remainder of the day he tried to make amends to Penny. They swam together and played three sets of tennis. In each contest Penny won with ease.

"You're about the first girl who ever beat me at anything," Jack said ruefully. "Guess that rap on the head did me no good."

"How about the sailboat race?" Penny tripped him. "Didn't Sally win the lantern trophy?"

Grudgingly, Jack admitted that she had. "But the race was a fluke," he added. "The wind was tricky and favored Sally's old tub. It won't happen twice."

Annoyed by the youth's alibis, Penny turned and walked away.

At dinner that night, Mr. Gandiss suggested that Mr. Parker and his daughter might like to visit his steel plant and airplane factory on the mainland. Despite vigorous protests, Jack was taken along.

The buildings owned by Mr. Gandiss were situated across the river in the town of Osage. Occupying many city blocks, the property included an airplane testing ground, and was protected by a high guard fence electrically charged.

"Every employee must pass inspection at the gate," Mr. Gandiss explained as the taxi cab approached the entrance to the main factory. "We operate on a twenty-four hour basis now, and even so can't keep abreast of orders."

Lights blazed in the low rows of windows, and from the chimneys of the steel plant, fire leaped high into the dark sky.

"Will we be able to see steel poured from the furnaces?" Penny asked eagerly. "I've always wanted to watch it done."

"You may tour every building if your feet hold out," Mr. Gandiss chuckled.

A squat, red-faced man with pouchy eyes, halted the taxi cab at the gate.

"No visitors allowed here at night," he began in a surly voice, and then recognized the plant owner. His manner changed instantly. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Gandiss! How are you this evening?"

"Very well, thank you, Clayton. I have some friends with me who wish to see the plant."

"Drive right in," the gateman invited, swinging open the barrier.

The taxi rolled through the gate, and drew up in front of one of the buildings. Inside, fluorescent lights gave the effect of daylight. Overhead carriers were lifting newly blanked and formed airplane parts from power presses, carrying them to sub-assembly lines.

"Raw materials, brought up-river by boats, enter one end of the building," Mr. Gandiss explained proudly. "Miraculously they come out the other end as finished airplanes ready for testing."

The plant had four main assembly lines along which

the wings, fuselages, engines, tail surfaces, pilot and bombardier floors were assembled, he explained. In one room the party paused to watch row upon row of fuselages being put together ready for transfer to the main assembly line.

"You have a wonderful factory here, Mr. Gandiss," Penny's father praised, much impressed. "It must be a job to keep tab on the personnel."

"Oh, everything has been reduced to a system. One department meshes into another. But if production falls down in any one department, results could be serious." Mr. Gandiss frowned and added: "Now take those petty brass thefts. In a way it is a trivial matter, but the practice is spreading."

"The disappearance of parts hasn't curtailed production to any extent?"

"Not as yet, but it has caused our stockrooms serious annoyance. Then the loss on a yearly basis will become considerable. The guilty persons must be caught, and the organizers broken up before it gets more serious."

Mr. Gandiss escorted the visitors into another large room where hundreds of girls in slacks, their hair bound by nets, worked over machines with concentrated attention.

"Our beginners start here," he explained. "Strangely, we lose more brass and copper from this shift than anywhere else in the plant."

"How do you explain it?" Penny asked.

"The girls are new and we are convinced they are being misled by someone. The entire situation has us baffled."

Few of the workers paid the visitors heed as they wandered along the rows of machines. However, a slovenly, sharp-eyed man with a push broom, watched them with deep interest. Known as Joe the Sweeper, though his real name was Joseph Jakaboloski, he once had been a skilled mechanic. Two of his fingers were missing, and he no longer did any useful work.

"See that man?" Mr. Gandiss said in an undertone. "Shortly after he started working for us, two years ago, he had an accident that was entirely his own fault. We immediately put him in an easy job and still pay him his former salary. But he doesn't even sweep a room properly."

"Why not let him go?" Mr. Parker questioned.

Mr. Gandiss smiled and shook his head. "He was injured while working for us, so we are responsible for looking after him. We would like to pension him off. You see, he constantly stirs up trouble among the new employes."

Joe the Sweeper had been watching Mr. Gandiss with concentrated attention, though too far away to hear what was said. With amusing haste, he swept his way closer to the group. Finally he smirked and sidled up to the factory owner.

"Can I see you alone fer a minute, Mr. Gandiss?" he asked, his voice a whine.

"I am very busy," the factory owner discouraged him. "What is it you want?"

Joe edged even closer, dropping his voice so that it was barely audible above the clatter of the machinery.

"You been losin' copper and brass from your factory, ain't you?"

The direct approach startled Mr. Gandiss. He gazed at Joe keenly, then nodded.

"Well, maybe I kin help you. What's it worth?"

Mr. Gandiss was careful not to show his dislike for the man. "If you are able to provide information which will lead to the apprehension of the thieves, I'll see that you get a substantial salary increase."

Joe blinked and grinned. "Last night I seen a girl in this room stick a piece of brass into her shirt front. She carried it off with her."

"Who was the girl?"

"Dunno her name. A blond piece in blue slacks."

"I'm afraid your information is of no value," Mr. Gandiss said impatiently. "Unless you know who she is—"

"She's a new gal that's only been workin' here a few nights," Joe supplied hastily. "You'll give me that salary raise if I turn her in?"

"If your information proves correct."

Joe's eyes brightened with a crafty light and he jerked his head toward the left.

"You can't see her from here," he muttered, "but you can get her name easy enough. She's the gal that operates machine No. 567."

CHAPTER

7

NIGHT SHIFT WORKER

"I DETEST a stool pigeon," said Mr. Gandiss after Joe the Sweeper had slouched away. "However, his information may be valuable. I can't afford not to investigate it."

Not wishing to attract comment from the other employes, the factory owner made no attempt to see the girl under suspicion. Instead, he escorted the party to his private office. Ringing a buzzer, he asked one of the foremen to bring the operator of Machine 567 to him.

Presently she came in, a thin, wiry girl in ill-fitting blue slacks and sweater. Her hair was bound beneath a dark net and she wore goggles. As she faced Mr. Gandiss, she removed the latter. Everyone stared.

For the girl was Sally Barker.

"You sent for me, Mr. Gandiss?" Subdued and embarrassed, her eyes roved from one person to another.

"Why, Sally," said the factory owner in astonishment. "I had no idea you were working here on the night shift. When were you employed?"

"A week ago."

Perplexed, Mr. Gandiss stared at the girl's factory badge. There could be no mistake. Plainly it bore the number 567.

"You like the work?" he asked after an awkward silence.

"Not very well," she confessed truthfully. "However, I can use the pay I receive."

"During the daytime I believe you help your father aboard the *River Queen*," Mr. Gandiss resumed, trying to be friendly. "Rather a strenuous program. When do you sleep?"

"Oh, I get enough rest." Sally spoke indifferently, though her eyes were red and she looked tired. "Pop didn't want me to take the job, but I have a special use for the money."

"Pretty clothes, I suppose—or perhaps a new sailboat?"

"A college education."

Mr. Gandiss nodded approvingly, and then, recalling the serious charge against the girl, became formal again. "You wonder why I sent for you?"

"I know my work hasn't been very good. I've tried, but I keep ruining materials."

This gave Mr. Gandiss the opening he sought.

"What do you do with the discarded pieces?" he inquired.

"Why, I just throw them aside." The question plainly puzzled Sally.

"You may have heard that we are having a little trouble here at the factory."

"What sort of trouble, Mr. Gandiss?"

"Small but valuable pieces of copper and brass seem to disappear with alarming regularity. Most of the thefts have been attributed to workers on the night shift."

Sally's blue eyes opened wide, but she returned Mr. Gandiss' steady gaze. Her chin raised. "I've heard talk about it among the girls," she replied briefly. "That's all I know."

"You have no idea who may be taking the materials?"

"Not the slightest, sir."

An awkward silence fell. Mr. Gandiss started to speak again, then changed his mind.

"Was there anything else?" Sally asked stiffly.

"Nothing."

"Then may I return to my work?"

"Why, yes." It was Mr. Gandiss' turn to appear awkward and ill at ease. "We hope you will enjoy your work here, Sally," he said, feeling that a friendly word was necessary to end the interview. "If you should learn anything that will lead to the arrest of

the thieves, I hope you will give us the information."

Sally inclined her head slightly in assent. With dignity, she walked from the office.

No one spoke for several minutes after the girl had gone. Then Mr. Gandiss drew a deep sigh.

"I had no idea Sally was working here," he said, frowning.

"Father, you shouldn't have accused her of stealing!" Jack burst out.

"My dear boy, I accused her of nothing."

"Well, Sally is proud. She took it that way. You don't really believe she would stoop to such a thing?"

"I confess I don't know what to think. Joe the Sweeper may not be a reliable informer."

"If he saw her hide brass in her clothing as he claims, why didn't he report her last night?" Jack demanded. "Sally is no thief. I've known her since she was a kid. I get mighty sore at her sometimes, she's so cocky. But she never did a dishonest act in her life."

"I'm glad to hear you defend her, Jack," Mr. Gandiss said quietly. "Certainly no action will be taken without far more conclusive evidence. Now suppose you and Penny amuse yourselves for a few minutes. Mr. Parker and I have a few business matters to discuss."

Thus dismissed, Penny and Jack wandered outside.

"Want to see the steel plant?" Jack asked indifferently. "They should be pouring about this time."

At Penny's eager assent, he led her to another building, up a steep flight of iron stairs to an inner balcony which overlooked the huge blast furnaces. In the noisy, hot room, conversation was practically impossible.

Gazing below, Penny saw a crew of men in front of one of the furnaces, cleaning the tapping hole with a long rod.

In a moment a signal was given and the molten steel was poured into a ladle capable of holding a hundred and fifty tons. An overhead crane, operated by a skilled worker, lifted the huge container to the pouring platform.

Next the molten mass was turned into rectangular ingots or molds.

"The steel will cool for about an hour before it is ready to be taken from the mold," Jack shouted in Penny's ear.

Moving on, they saw other ingots already cooled, and in a stripping shed observed cranes with huge tongs engage the lugs of the molds and lift them from the ingots.

"Each one of those ingots weighs twenty thousand pounds," Jack said, surprising Penny with his knowledge. "After stripping, they are placed in gas-heated pit furnaces and brought to rolling temperature."

To see fiery ribbons of steel rolled from cherry red ingots was to Penny the most fascinating process of

all. She could have watched for hours, but Jack, bored by the familiar sight, kept urging her on.

Leaving the steel plant, they returned to the main factory buildings, and without thinking, sauntered toward the room where Sally worked. A portable lunch cart had just supplied hot soup and sandwiches to the employes. Sally sat eating at her machine. Seeing Jack, she quickly looked away.

"Now she's really sore at me, and I can't blame her," Jack commented. "Who is Joe the Sweeper anyhow? Riff-raff, I'll warrant."

Though somewhat amused by the boy's staunch defense of Sally, Penny was inclined to agree in his second observation. Although she knew nothing of the man who had turned informer, she had not liked the sly look of his face.

Before the pair could approach Sally, the brief lunch period came to an end. A whistle blew, sending the girls back to their machines.

"You'll have to step on it," a foreman told Sally. "You're behind in your quota."

Her reply was inaudible, but as she adjusted her machine and started it up, she began to work with nervous haste.

"This is no place for Sally," Jack said, obviously bothered. "She never was cut out for factory work. And that foreman, Rogers, who is over her! He's a regular slave driver!"

"I thought you didn't like Sally," Penny teased.

"I want to see her get a square deal, that's all," Jack replied, his face flushing.

Joe the Sweeper sidled over to the couple. "What's the verdict?" he asked in a confidential tone.

Jack pretended not to understand.

"Is the gal going to get fired?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Jack answered coldly. "Why does it mean so much to you?"

"Why, it don't," the sweeper muttered. "She ain't no skin off my elbow."

Penny and Jack walked on through the workroom, aware that many pairs of eyes followed them. Sally, bending over a grinding machine, looked up self-consciously. She was grinding pieces of metal, measuring each with a micrometer. There was a streak of grease across her cheek and she looked very tired.

Suddenly as Sally threw the wheel in, there was a loud clattering noise. The foreman came running. He threw the wheel back.

"What did I do?" Sally gasped, shaking from nervousness.

"You forgot to pull this lever." The foreman said curtly. "Ruined a piece of work too! Now try to think what you're doing and get down to business."

Penny and Jack moved away, not wishing to add to the girl's embarrassment. But a few minutes later,

in leaving the workroom, they again passed close to Sally's machine. This time she did not see them until they were almost beside her.

"How is it going, Sally?" Jack asked in a friendly way.

Sally raised her eyes, and in so doing forgot her work. As she automatically placed the metal in line with the wheel, she held her fingers there without thinking. Another instant and they would have been mangled.

Horrified, Penny saw what was about to happen.

"Sally!" she cried. Acting instinctively, she reached and jerked the girl's hand away from the swift turning machinery. The wheel had missed Sally's fingers by a mere fraction of an inch.

The foreman came running again, obviously annoyed. Shutting off the machine, he demanded to know what was wrong.

Sally leaned her head weakly on the table, trying to regain composure. Her face was drained of color and she trembled as from a chill. "Thanks," she said brokenly to Penny. "I—I don't know what's the matter with me tonight. I'm not coordinated right."

"Go take a walk," the foreman advised, not unkindly. "A nice long walk. Get a drink or something. You'll be okay."

"I'll never learn," Sally said in a choked voice.

"Sure, you will. Everyone has to go through a beginner's stage. Get yourself a drink. Then you'll feel better."

"Let me go with you," Penny said, taking Sally by the arm.

Without conversation, they made their way between the long rows of machines to the locker room. There Sally sank down on a bench, burying her face in her hands.

"I'm nervous and upset tonight," she excused herself. "I can't seem to get the hang of machine work."

"Why not give it up? Do you really need the money so badly?"

"No," Sally admitted truthfully. "I've set my heart on a college education, but Pop could raise the money somehow. It's just that he's had financial troubles the past year, and I wanted to help out."

"Some persons aren't cut out to be factory workers," Penny resumed. "Do you realize that you nearly lost several of your fingers tonight?"

"Yes," Sally agreed, her freckled face becoming deadly sober. "I'll always be grateful to you. What Mr. Gandiss said in his office upset me. I wasn't thinking of my work."

"I thought that might be it. Well, forget the entire matter if you can."

Sally nodded and getting up, drank at the fountain.

"I'll have to go back to work now," she said with an effort. "First, I'll get myself a clean hanky."

With a key which she wore on a string about her neck, the girl opened her locker. On the floor lay a leather jacket that had fallen from its hook.

As Sally picked it up, a heavy object slipped from one of the pockets, thudding against the tin of the locker floor.

She stooped quickly to retrieve it, and then, embarrassed, tried to shield the article from view. But she could not hide it from Penny who stood directly behind. The object that had fallen from the jacket was a small coupling of brass!

CHAPTER

8

OVERHEARD IN THE GATEHOUSE

"WHY, WHERE did that come from?" Sally murmured as she fingered the piece of metal. "I never put it in my locker."

Confused, she raised bewildered eyes to Penny. Just then the locker room door opened and a forelady came in. Miss Grimley's keen gaze fastened upon the brass coupling in Sally's hand. Awkwardly, the girl tried to hide it in a fold of her slacks.

"What do you have?" the forelady asked, moving like a hawk toward the girls.

"Why, nothing," Sally stammered.

"Isn't that a piece of brass?" Miss Grimley demanded. "Where did you get it?"

"I found it in my locker."

"In your locker!"

"I don't know how it got there," Sally said quickly, reading suspicion in the other's face. "I'm sure I never put it there."

Miss Grimley took the brass from her, inspecting it briefly.

"This looks very much like one of the parts that has been disappearing from the stockroom," she said, her voice icy.

"But I've never been near the stockroom!" Sally cried. "In the few days that I've been employed here, I've barely left my machine."

Penny tried to intercede in the girl's behalf.

"I'm sure Sally knew nothing about the article being in her locker," she assured the forelady. "When she opened it a moment ago and lifted her jacket, the piece of brass fell from a pocket."

"Someone must have put it there!" Sally added indignantly. "I'm certain I never did."

"Have you given your locker key to anyone?"

"No."

"And have you always kept it locked?"

"Why, I think so."

"I am sorry," said Miss Grimley in a tone which implied exactly the opposite, "but I will have to report this. You understand my position."

"Please—"

"I have no choice," Miss Grimley cut her short. "Come with me, please."

Penny started to accompany Sally, but the forelady by a gesture indicated that she was not to come. The door closed behind them.

For ten minutes Penny waited, hoping that Sally would return. Finally she wandered outside. Sally was not on the floor and another girl had taken her place at the machine.

Seeing Joe the Sweeper cleaning a corridor, Penny asked him about Sally.

"No. 567?" the man inquired with a grin which showed a gap between his front upper teeth. "You won't see her no more! She's in the employment office now, and they're giving her the can!"

"You mean she's being discharged?"

"Sure. We don't want no thieves around here!"

"Sally Barker isn't a thief," Penny retorted loyally. "By the way, how did you know why the girl was taken to the office?"

The question momentarily confused Joe. But his reply was glib enough.

"Oh, I have a way o' knowin' what goes on around here," he smirked. "I figured that gal was light-fingered the day they hired her. It didn't surprise me none that they found the stuff in her locker."

"And who told you that?" Penny pursued the subject.

"Why, you said so yourself—"

"Oh, no I didn't."

"It was the forelady," Joe corrected himself. "I seen the brass in her hand when she came out of the locker room with that gal."

Disgusted, Penny turned her back and walked away in search of Jack. It was none of her affair, she knew, but it seemed to her that Joe the Sweeper had taken more than ordinary interest in Sally's downfall. His statements, too, had been confused.

"I don't trust that fellow," she thought. "He's sly and mean."

Penny could not find Jack, and when she returned to Mr. Gandiss' office, a secretary told her that the factory owner and her father expected to meet her at the main gate.

Hastening there, Penny saw no sign of them. Nor was the gateman on duty. However, hearing low voices inside the gatehouse, she stepped to the doorway. No one was in view, but two men were talking in the inner office.

"It worked slick as a whistle," she heard one of them say. "The girl was caught with the stuff on her, and they fired her."

"Who was she?"

"A new employee named Sally Barker."

"Good enough, Joe. That ought to take the heat off the others for awhile at least."

The name startled Penny who instantly wondered if one of the speakers might be Sweeper Joe. Confirming her suspicion, the man came out of the inner room a moment later. Seeing her, he stopped short and his jaw dropped.

"What you doin' here?" he demanded gruffly.

"Waiting for Mr. Gandiss," Penny replied. "And you?"

Joe did not answer. Mumbling something, he pushed past her and went off toward the main factory building.

"He's certainly acting as if he deliberately planned to get Sally into trouble," she thought resentfully.

Clayton, the gateman, showed his face a moment later, and he too acted self-conscious. As he checked a car through into the factory grounds, he glanced sideways at Penny, obviously uneasy as to how much she might have overheard.

"Been here long?" he inquired carelessly.

"No, I just came," Penny answered with pretended unconcern. "I'm waiting for my father."

The men did not come immediately. However, as Penny loitered near the gatehouse, she saw Sally Barker hurriedly leaving the factory building.

"Ain't you off early tonight?" the gateman asked as she approached.

"I'm off for good," Sally answered shortly. Her face was tear-stained and she did not try to hide the fact that she had been crying.

"Fired?"

"That's right," Sally replied. "Unjustly too!"

"Shoo, you don't say!" the gateman exclaimed,

sympathetically. "What did they give you the can for?"

Sally, in no mood to provide details, went on without answering. Penny ran to overtake her.

"I'll walk with you to the boundaries of the grounds," she said quickly. "Tell me what happened."

"Just what you would expect," Sally shrugged. "They asked me a lot of questions in the personnel office. I told the truth—that I knew nothing about that putrid piece of brass that turned up in my locker! Then they gave me a nice little lecture, and said they were sorry but my services no longer were required. Branded as a thief!"

"Don't take it so hard, Sally," Penny said kindly. "Someone probably planted the brass in your locker."

"Of course! But I can't prove it."

"Why not appeal to Mr. Gandiss? He likes you and—"

"No," Sally said firmly, kicking at a piece of gravel on the driveway, "I'll ask no favors of Mr. Gandiss. He would have me reinstated, no doubt, but it would be too humiliating."

"Do you know of anyone in the factory who dislikes you?"

Sally shook her head. "That's the funny part of it. I'm not acquainted with anyone. I just started in."

"How about Joe the Sweeper?"

"Oh, him!" Sally was scornful. "He caught me in the hall the other day and tried to get fresh. I slapped his face!"

"Then perhaps he was the one that got you into trouble."

"He's too stupid," Sally dismissed the subject.

"I'm not so sure of that," returned Penny thoughtfully.

The girls had reached the street and Sally's bus was in sight.

"What will you do now?" Penny asked hurriedly. "Get a job at another factory?"

"I doubt it," Sally replied, fishing in her pocketbook for a bus token. "I'll help Pop on the *River Queen.* If I do take another job it won't be until after the sailboat races."

"I'd forgotten about that. When is the race?"

"The preliminary is in a few days—next Friday. The finals are a week later."

"I hope you win," said Penny sincerely. "I'll certainly be on hand to watch."

The bus pulled up at the curb. Swing-shift employes, arriving at the factory for work, crowded past the two girls. Impulsively Sally turned and squeezed Penny's hand.

"I like you," she said with deep feeling. "You've

been kind. Will you come to see me sometime while you're here?"

"Of course! I've not brought back those clothes I borrowed yet!"

"I'll look for you," Sally declared warmly. "I feel that you're a real friend."

Squeezing Penny's hand again, she sprang aboard the bus and was lost in the throng of passengers.

CHAPTER

9

SALLY'S HELPER

SEVERAL DAYS of inactivity followed for Penny at Shadow Island. For the most part, Jack was friendly and tried to provide entertainment. However, he was away much of the time, supervising the work of repairing and getting the *Spindrift* into condition for the coming trophy race.

Sally Barker's name seldom was mentioned in the Gandiss household, though it was known that the girl intended to enter the competition regardless of her disgrace at the factory. Once Penny asked Jack point-blank what he thought of the entire matter.

"Just what I always did," he answered briefly. "Sally never took anything from the factory. It wouldn't be in keeping with her character."

"Then why isn't she cleared?"

"Father did take the matter up with the personnel department, but he doesn't want to go over the mana-

ger's head. The brass was found in her locker and quite a few employes learned about it."

"The brass was planted!"

"Probably," agreed Jack. "But it's none of my affair. Sally wasn't a very good factory worker and the personnel director thought he had to make an example of someone—"

"So Sally became the goat! I call it unfair. Did the thefts cease after she left?"

"They're worse than ever."

"Then obviously Sally had nothing to do with it!"

"Not just one person is involved. The brass is being taken by an organized ring of employes."

"I suppose it's none of my affair, but in justice I think Sally should be cleared. I don't know the girl well, but I like her."

"You may as well hear the whole story," Jack said uncomfortably. "Father wrote her a letter, inviting her to come in for an interview. She paid no attention."

"Perhaps she didn't get the letter."

"She got it all right. I met her on the street yesterday, and when I tried to talk to her, she threatened to heave a can of varnish in my face! Furthermore, she gave me to understand she intends to defeat me soundly in the race tomorrow."

"I'll be there to watch," grinned Penny. "The contest should be interesting."

While Jack was out on the river practicing for the approaching competition, Penny accompanied her father to the mainland to mail letters and make a few purchases Mrs. Gandiss had requested. In returning to the waterfront, they wandered down a street within view of the Gandiss factory.

Penny's attention was drawn to a man who came out of an alley at the rear of the plant and stood staring at a tiny junk shop which was situated directly opposite the Gandiss factory.

"There's Joe the Sweeper," she observed aloud. And then an instant later added: "That's queer!"

"What is?" inquired her father.

"Why, that junk shop! I've been down this street several times, but I never noticed it there before. I would have sworn that the building was empty."

Mr. Parker gave her a quick, amused look. "It was until yesterday," he informed.

"You seem to know all about it!" Penny suddenly became suspicious. "What are you keeping from me?"

Mr. Parker did not reply, for he was watching the man who had emerged from the alley. Joe seemed to debate for awhile, they crossed the street and entered the junk shop.

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Parker. "Our bait seems to be working."

"What are you talking about?" Penny demanded in exasperation. "Will you kindly explain?"

"You recall Mr. Gandiss asked me to help him solve the mystery of those brass thefts at the plant."

"Why, yes, but I didn't know you had begun to do anything about it."

"Our plan may not succeed. However, we're trying out a little idea of mine."

"Does it have anything to do with that junk shop?"

"Yes, the place was opened yesterday by Heiney Growski."

Penny's blue eyes opened wide for she knew the man well. A prominent detective in Riverview, he had won distinction by solving a number of difficult cases.

"Heiney is an expert at make-up and impersonation," Mr. Parker added. "We brought him here and installed him as the owner of the junk store across the street. His instructions are to buy brass and copper at above the prevailing market prices."

"You expect employes who may be pilfering metals to seek the highest price obtainable!"

"That's our idea. It may not work."

"It should," Penny cried jubilantly. "Sweeper Joe went in there not three minutes ago! I've suspected him from the first!"

"Aren't you jumping to pretty fast conclusions?"

"From what I heard him say to the gatekeeper Clayton, I'm sure he's mixed up in some underhanded scheme."

"You're not certain of it, Penny. Joe has been carefully investigated. He seems too stupid a fellow to have engineered such a clever, organized method of pilfering."

"He never appeared stupid to me. Dad, let's drift over to the junk shop, and learn what is happening."

"And give everything away? No, Heiney will report if anything of consequence develops. In the meantime, we must show no interest in the shop."

To Penny's disappointment, her father refused to remain longer in the vicinity of the factory. Without glancing toward the junk shop, they walked on to the riverfront. The motorboat they had expected to meet them had not yet arrived. While Mr. Parker purchased a newspaper and sat down on the dock to read, Penny sauntered along the shore.

A short distance away on a stretch of beach, a boat had been overturned. Sally Barker, in blue overalls rolled to the knees, was painting it with deft, sure strokes. Penny walked over to watch the work.

Glancing up, Sally smiled, but did not speak. A smudge of blue paint stained her cheek. She had sanded the bottom of the *Cat's Paw*, and now was slapping on a final coat of paint.

"Will it dry in time for the race tomorrow?" Penny inquired, making conversation.

"The finish won't be hard, but that's the way I want it," Sally said, dipping her brush. "It makes a faster racing bottom."

"Then you're all ready for competition?"

"The boat is ready." Sally hesitated, then added. "But I may not enter the race after all."

"Not enter? Why?"

Having finished painting, Sally carefully cleaned her brush, and tightly closed the paint and varnish cans. She wiped her hands on her faded overalls.

"The boy who was racing with me served notice this morning that he had changed his mind. I haven't asked anyone else, because I didn't want to be turned down."

"But I should think anyone who likes to sail would be crazy for the chance—" Penny began. Then as she met Sally's gaze, her voice trailed off.

"You know what I mean," said Sally quietly.

"Not the factory episode?"

"Yes, word traveled around."

"Jack didn't tell?"

"I don't think so, but I don't know," Sally replied honestly. "Anyway, everyone learned why I was discharged. Pop is furious."

"Your mother too, I suppose?"

"I have no mother. She died when I was ten. Since then, Pop and I have lived aboard the *Queen*. Pop always taught me to speak my mind, never to be afraid, and above all to be honest. To be accused of something one didn't do and to be branded as a thief is the limit!"

Penny nodded sympathetically. "About the race," she said, reverting to the previous subject, "you aren't really serious about not entering?"

"It means everything to me," Sally admitted soberly. "But I can't race alone. The rules call for two persons in each boat."

"You need an expert sailor?"

"Not necessarily. Of course, the person would have to know how to handle ropes and carry out orders. Also, not lose his head in an emergency. To balance the *Cat's Paw* right I need someone about my own weight."

"It has to be a boy?"

"Mercy, no! I would prefer a girl if I knew whom to ask." Sally suddenly caught the drift of Penny's conversation, and a look of amazed delight came upon her face. "Not you!" she exclaimed. "You don't mean you would be willing—"

"If you want or could use me. I'm a long way from an expert, but I do know a little about sailboats. We have one in Riverview. However, I never competed in a race."

"I'd be tickled pink to have you!"

"Then it's settled."

"But what about the Gandiss family? You are their guest."

"That part is a bit awkward," Penny admitted. "But they are all good sports. I'm sure no one will hold it against me."

"After I was discharged from the factory?"

"That really wasn't Mr. Gandiss' doing, Sally. The plant is so large he scarcely knows what goes on in some departments. You were discharged by the personnel manager."

"I realize that."

"Didn't Mr. Gandiss write you a letter asking you to come in for a personal interview?"

"Yes, he did," Sally acknowledged reluctantly. "I was angry and I tore it up."

"Then you shouldn't blame Mr. Gandiss."

"I'm not blaming him, Penny. I like Mr. Gandiss very much. In fact, I like him so well I never could bear to accept favors from him."

"Not even to clear your name?"

Sally washed her hands at the river's edge, and rolled down the legs of her overalls. "The person who put that brass in my locker hasn't been caught?" she inquired softly.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then all Mr. Gandiss could do would be to offer

me another chance," Sally said bitterly. "I'll never work in the factory on that basis. If I am cleared completely, then I am willing to go back."

"Mr. Gandiss is trying to solve the mystery of those thefts," Penny declared. "I know that to be a fact. Have you any idea who the guilty parties might be?"

Sally straightened up, digging at paint which had lodged beneath her fingernails. She did not answer.

"You do have a clue!" Penny cried.

"Maybe." Sally smiled mysteriously.

"Tell me what it is."

"No, I intend to work by myself until I'm sure that I'm on the right track. I've not even told Pop."

"Does it have anything to do with Sweeper Joe?"

Sally's expression became blank. "I don't know much about him," she dismissed the subject. "My information concerns a certain house upriver. But don't ask me to tell you more."

Hastily she gathered up paint cans and brush, turning to leave. "Are you really serious about racing with me tomorrow?" she demanded.

"Of course!"

"Then you're elected first mate of the *Cat's Paw!* Meet me at the yacht club dock at six in the morning for a trial workout. The preliminary race is at two."

"I'll be there without fail."

"And bring a little luck with you," Sally added with a grin. "We may need it to defeat the *Spindrift.*"

CHAPTER

10

OVERTURNED

WHEN PENNY reached the dock next morning she found that Sally had preceded her by many hours. The varnished wood of the *Cat's Paw* shone in the sunlight. Below the waterline, the boat was as smooth and slippery as glass.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Sally asked proudly, squeezing water from a sponge she had been using. "The rigging has been overhauled, and Pop came through at the last minute with a new jib sail. Every rope has been changed too."

"It looks grand," Penny praised. "You must have worked like a galley slave getting everything ready for the race."

"I have, but I want to win. This race means everything to me."

"Are you sure you want me to sail with you?" Penny asked dubiously. "After all, I am not an expert. I might handicap you."

"Nonsense! There's no one I would rather have—that is, if you still want to do it. Was Jack angry when you told him?"

Penny confessed that she had not spoken to any of the Gandiss family of her intention to take part in the race. "But it will be all right," she added. "Jack really isn't such a bad sport when you get to know him. I only hope we win!"

"Oh, we'll come in among the leading five—that's certain," Sally said carelessly. "This is only a perliminary race today. The five winning boats will compete next week in the finals."

"If you lose today must you give up the trophy?"

"Not until after the final race." Sally laughed goodnaturedly. "But don't put such ideas in my head. We can't lose! I'm grimly determined that Jack mustn't beat me!"

"I do believe the race is a personal feud between you two! Why does it mean so much to defeat him?"

Sally stepped nimbly aboard the scrubbed deck, stowing away the sponge under one of the seats. "Jack and I always have been rivals," she admitted. "We went to grade school together. He used to make fun of me because I lived on a ferryboat."

"Jack was only a kid then."

"I know. But we always were in each other's hair. We competed in everything—debates, literary competitions, sports. Jack usually defeated me too. In sail-

ing, due to Pop's coaching, I may have a slight edge over him."

"Do you really dislike Jack?"

"Why, no." Sally's tone indicated she never had given the matter previous thought. "If he weren't around to fight with, I suppose I'd miss him terribly."

Penny sat down on the dock to lace up a pair of soft-soled tennis shoes. By the time she had them on, Sally was ready to shove off for the trial run.

"Suppose we take about an hour's work-out, and then rest until time for the race," she suggested. "You'll quickly learn the tricks of this little boat. She's a sweet sailer."

The *Cat's Paw* had been tied to the dock with a stiff wind blowing across it, and larger boats were berthed on either side. To get away smoothly without endangering the other craft would be no easy task. As the girls ran up the mainsail, a few loiterers gathered to watch the departure.

"All set, mate?" grinned Sally. "Let's go."

With a speed that amazed Penny, she trimmed the main and jib sheets flat amidships, placing the tiller a little to starboard.

"Haul up the centerboard!" she instructed.

Penny pulled up the board, feeling a trifle awkward and inadept.

Sally leaped out onto the dock, and casting off, held the boat's head steady into the eye of the wind. With

a tremendous shove which delighted the spectators, she sent the *Cat's Paw* straight aft, and made a flying leap aboard.

With sails flat amidships, the boat shot straight backwards. As they started to clear the stern of the boat that was to starboard, Sally let the tiller move over to that side. The bow of the *Cat's Paw* began to swing to starboard.

Not until then did Penny observe that the *Spindrift* was tied up only a few boat-lengths away. Jack, armed with several bottles of pop, came hurriedly from the clubhouse. Noting Sally's spectacular departure, he joined the throng at the railing.

"We'll give the crowd a real thrill," Sally muttered, keeping her voice low so that it would not carry over the water. "If this trick works, it should be good."

Even Penny was worried. The bow of the *Cat's Paw* had swung rapidly to starboard. But Sally, calm and cool, still hung on to the sheets.

"Put your tiller the other way!" Jack shouted from the dock. "Let your sheet run!"

Enjoying the boy's excitement, Sally pretended to be deaf. Wind had struck the sails, but the *Cat's Paw* continued to sail backwards. A crash seemed impossible to avert. Then at the last instant, the bow swung clear of the neighboring boats.

Grinning triumphantly, Sally put the tiller to port and started the sheets. They sailed briskly away.

"Beautifully done!" praised Penny. "Not one sailor in a hundred could pull that off. It took nerve!"

"Pop taught me that trick. It's risky, of course. If the sails should decide to take charge, or the tiller should fail to go to starboard, one probably would collide with the other boats."

"You surprised Jack. He expected you to crash."

"We'll surprise him this afternoon too," Sally declared confidently, steering out into mid-stream. "If this breeze holds, it's just what the doctor ordered!"

For an hour the girls practiced maneuvers until Penny was thoroughly adept at handling the ropes and carrying out orders. Although the rules of the race did not allow them to sail the actual course, Sally pointed it out.

"We start near the clubhouse," she explained. "Then, taking a triangular route we sail past Hat Island to the first marker. After rounding it, we keep on to the marker near the eastern river shore, and sail back to our starting point."

Sally was in high spirits, for she declared that if the breeze held, *Cat's Paw* would perform at her best. Though no one knew exactly what Jack's new boat, *Spindrift* could do, observation had convinced most sailing enthusiasts that it would be favored in a light breeze.

"I hope it blows a gale this afternoon!" Sally chuckled as they moored at the dock. "Get some rest now,

Penny, and meet me at the clubhouse about one o'clock. The race starts sharp at two."

Penny did not see Jack when she returned to Shadow Island, so had no chance to tell him of her plan to sail with Sally in the competition. Her father, whom she took into her confidence, was not entirely in favor of the decision.

"We are guests of Mr. and Mrs. Gandiss," he reproved mildly. "To sail against Jack is a tactless thing to do. Though actually you may do him a favor, for you'll likely be more of a handicap than a help in the race."

"That's what I figured," laughed Penny.

By chance, Mr. Gandiss overheard the conversation. Entering the living room, he declared that Penny must not hesitate to enter the competition.

"After all, the race is supposed to be for fun," he said emphatically. "Lately Jack and Sally have made it into a feud. I really think it would do the boy good to be defeated soundly."

Long before the hour of the race, Penny was at the yacht club docks, dressed in blue slacks, white polo shirt, and an added jacket for protection from wind and blistering sun rays.

Rowboats, canoes and small sailing craft plied lazily up and down the river, while motor yachts with flags flying, cruised past the clubhouse. Out in the main channel where the race was to be held, the judges' boat

had been anchored. The shores were thronged with spectators, many of whom had enjoyed picnic lunches on the grassy banks.

Penny walked along the dock searching for the *Cat's Paw*. She came first to the *Spindrift* which was just preparing to get underway. Jack and a youth Penny did not know, were busy coiling ropes.

"Hi, Penny!" Jack greeted her, glancing up from his work. "You're going to see a real race today! Will I take Sally Barker for a breeze!"

Just at that moment, Sally herself appeared from inside the clubhouse. Seeing Penny, she waved and called: "Come on, mate, it's time we shove off!"

Jack's jaw dropped and he gazed at the two girls accusingly.

"What is this?" he demanded. "Penny, you're not racing in Sally's boat?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, if that isn't something!" Jack said no more, but his tone had made it clear he considered Penny nothing short of a traitor.

The two boats presently sailed out from the protecting shores to join the other fifteen-footers which had entered the race. With the breeze blowing strong, the contestants tacked rapidly back and forth, jockeying for the best positions at the start of the contest.

Tensely Sally glanced at her wristwatch. "Five

minutes until two," she observed. "The gun will go off any minute now."

Nineteen boats comprised the racing fleet, but in comparison to Jack and Sally, many of the youthful captains were mere novices. Experts were divided in opinion as to the winner, but nearly everyone agreed it would be either Jack or Sally, with the odds slightly in favor of the latter.

"There goes the signal!" cried Sally.

The boats made a bunched start with *Cat's Paw* and *Spindrift* in the best positions. In the sharp breeze, one of the craft carried away a stay, and with a broken mast, dropped out of the race. The others headed for the first marker.

At first Sally and Jack raced almost bow to bow, then gradually the *Cat's Paw* forged steadily ahead. Except for three or four boats, the others began to fall farther and farther behind.

"We'll win!" Penny cried jubilantly.

"It's too soon to crow yet," Sally warned. "While it looks as if this breeze will hold for the entire race, no one can tell. Anything might happen."

Penny glanced back at Jack's boat a good six to eight lengths behind. The boy deliberately turned his head, acting as if he did not see her.

The *Cat's Paw* hugged the marker as it made the turn at Hat Island. Rounding the body of land, the

girls were annoyed to see a canoe with three children paddling directly across their course.

"Now how did they get out here?" Sally murmured with a worried frown. "They should know better!"

At first the children did not seem to realize that they were directly in the path of the racing boats. But as they saw the fleet rounding Hat Island in the wake of the *Cat's Paw* and the *Spindrift,* they suddenly became panic-stricken.

With frantic haste, they tried to get out of the way. In her confusion, one of the girls dropped a paddle, and as it floated away, she made a desperate lunge to recover it. Another of the occupants, heavy-set and awkward, leaned far over the same side in an attempt to help her.

"They'll upset if they aren't careful!" Penny groaned. "Yes, there they go!"

Even as she spoke, the canoe flipped over, tossing the three girls into the water. Two of them grasped the overturned craft and held on. The third, unable to swim, was too far away to reach the extended hand of her terrified companions.

Making inarticulate, strangled sounds in her throat, she frantically thrashed the water, trying desperately to save herself.

CHAPTER

11

A QUESTION OF RULES

"QUICK!" SALLY cried, remaining at the tiller of the *Cat's Paw*. "The life preserver!"

Finding one under the seat, Penny took careful aim and hurled it in a high arc over the span of water. The throw was nearly perfect and the life preserver plopped heavily on the surface not two feet from the struggling girl. But she was too panic-stricken to reach out and grasp it.

The river current carried the preserver downstream. Sally knew then that to save the girl she must turn aside and abandon the race.

"Coming about!" she called sharply to warn Penny of the swinging boom.

Already beyond the girl, whose struggles were becoming weaker, they turned and sailed directly toward her. Penny kicked off her shoes, and before Sally could protest, dived over the gunwale.

A half dozen long strokes carried her directly be-

hind the struggling girl. Hooking a hand beneath her chin, she pulled her into a firm, safe hold, then towed her to the *Cat's Paw* where Sally helped them both aboard.

Throughout the rescue, the other two children had clung to the overturned canoe. Sally saw that they were in no danger, for a motorboat from shore was plowing swiftly to the rescue. Standing by until the two were taken safely aboard, she then glanced toward the fleet of racing boats.

Nearly all of them had passed the *Cat's Paw* and were well on their way toward the second marker. The *Spindrift* led the field.

"We're out of the race," she said dismally.

"No! Don't give up!" Penny pleaded. "You still may have a chance. This girl is all right. I'll look after her while you sail."

Sally remained unconvinced. "We couldn't possibly overtake Jack now."

"But we do have a chance to come in among the five leaders! Then you would be able to race in the finals. You wouldn't lose the lantern trophy."

Sparkle came into Sally's eyes again. Her lips drew into a tight, determined line.

"All right, we'll keep on!" she decided. "But it will be nip and tuck to win even fifth place. See what you can do for our passenger."

The girl who had been hauled aboard was not more

than thirteen years old. Although conscious, she had swallowed considerable water and was dazed from the experience. As she began to stir, Penny knelt beside her.

"Lie still," she said soothingly. "We'll have you at the dock soon."

Stripping off her own jacket, Penny tucked it about the shivering child.

"We're balanced badly," Sally commented, her eyes on the line of boats far ahead," and overloaded too. It's foolish to try—"

"No, it isn't!" Penny said firmly. "We're sailing great guns, Sally! Look at the water boiling behind our rudder."

Almost as if it were driven by a motor, the *Cat's Paw* plowed through the waves, leaving a trail of foam and bubbles in her wake. Despite the handicap of an extra passenger, the boat was gaining on the contestants ahead.

"If only the course were longer!" Sally murmured, straining against the pull of the main sheet.

They rounded the second marker only a few feet behind a group of bunched boats. One by one they passed them until only seven remained ahead. But with the finish line close by, they could not seem to gain another inch.

"We can't make it," Sally said, turning to gaze at the shore with its crowd of excited spectators.

"We're bound to finish seventh or eighth, out of the race."

"We're still footing faster than the other boats," Penny observed. "Don't give up yet."

A moment later, the crack of a revolver sounding over the water, told the girls that the *Spindrift* had crossed the finish line in first place.

To add to Sally's difficulties, the rescued girl began to stir and rock the boat. Each time she moved, the *Cat's Paw* lost pace. Though they passed the next two boats, they could not gain to any extent on the one which seemed destined to finish in fifth place.

Sally had been right, Penny realized. Barring a miracle, the *Cat's Paw* could not be among the winners. Although they were slowly gaining, the finish line was too close for them to overcome the lead of the remaining boats.

And then the miracle occurred. The *Elf*, directly ahead, seemed to falter and to turn slightly aside. The *Cat's Paw* seized the chance and forged even.

"Go to it, Sally!" her skipper, Tom Evans, a freckled youth, called. "You belong in the finals!"

Then the girls understood and were grateful. Deliberately, the boy had slowed his boat so that Sally might be among the winners.

"It was a fine thing to do!" Sally whispered. "But how I hate to win in such fashion!"

"Tom Evans knew he had no chance in the finals,"

Penny said. "As he said, you belong there for you are one of the best sailors in the fleet."

Sally crossed the finish line in fifth place, then sailed on to the dock by the clubhouse. As Penny leaped out to make the boat fast, willing hands assisted with the bedraggled passenger. The child was taken to the clubhouse for a change of clothes. Officials gathered about Penny and Sally, congratulating them upon the race.

"I didn't really win," the latter said, paying tribute to Tom Evans. "The *Elf* deliberately turned aside to give me a chance to pass."

Nearby, Jack Gandiss who had won the race, stood unnoticed. After awhile he walked over to the dock where Sally and Penny were collecting their belongings.

"That was a nice rescue," he said diffidently. "Of course it cost you second place, which was a pity."

Sally cocked an eyebrow. "*Second* place?" she repeated. "Well, I like that!"

"You never could have defeated the *Spindrift*."

"No? Well, if my memory serves me right, the *Cat's Paw* was leading when I had to turn aside. Not that I wasn't glad to do it."

"You may have been ahead, but I was coming up fast. I would have overtaken you at the second marker or sooner."

"Children! Children!" interposed Penny as she

neatly folded a sail and slipped it into a snowy white cover. "Must you always claw at each other?"

"Why, we aren't fighting," Sally denied with a grin.

"Heck, no!" Jack agreed. He started away, then turned and came back. "By the way, Sally. How about the trophy?"

Sally did not understand what he meant.

"I won the race, so doesn't the brass lantern belong to me?" Jack pursued the subject.

"Well, it will if you win the final next week."

"That's in the bag."

"Like fun it is!" Sally said indignantly. "Jack, I hate to crush those delicate feelings of yours, but you're due for the worst defeat of your life!"

The argument might have started anew, but Jack reverted to the matter of the lantern trophy.

"I'm the winner now, and it should be turned over to me," he insisted.

Sally became annoyed. "That's not according to the rules of the competition," she returned. "The regulations governing the race say that the *final* winner is entitled to keep the trophy. I was last year's winner. The one this season hasn't yet been determined."

"It's not safe to keep the lantern aboard the *River Queen*."

"Don't be silly! There couldn't be a safer place! Pop and I chained the trophy to a beam. It can't be removed without cutting the chain."

"Someone could take the trophy by unlocking the padlock."

"Oh, no, they couldn't," Sally grinned provokingly. "You see, I've already lost the key. The only way that lantern can be removed is by cutting the chain."

Jack was enraged. "You've lost the key?" he demanded. "If that isn't the last straw!"

Hanson Brown, chairman of the racing committee, chanced to be passing, and Jack impulsively hailed him. To the chagrin of the girls, he asked for a ruling on the matter of the trophy's possession.

"Why, I don't recall that such a question ever came up before," the official replied. "My judgment is that Miss Barker has a right to retain the trophy until the final race."

"Ha!" chuckled Sally, enjoying Jack's discomfiture. "How do you like that?"

Jack turned to leave. But he could not refrain from one parting shot. "All right," he said, "you get to keep the trophy, but mind—if anything should happen to it—you alone will be responsible!"

CHAPTER

12

NIGHT PROWLER

WHEN PENNY, her father, and the Gandiss family returned late that afternoon to Shadow Island, a strange motorboat was tied up at the dock. On the veranda a man sat waiting. Although his face appeared familiar, Penny did not recognize him.

Her father, however, spoke his name instantly. "Heiney Growski! Anything to report?"

Penny remembered then that he was the detective who had been placed in charge of the junk shop near the Gandiss factory.

The man arose, laying aside a newspaper he had been reading to pass the time. "I've learned a little," he replied to Mr. Parker's question. "Shall we talk here?"

"Go ahead," encouraged Mr. Gandiss carelessly. "This is my son, Jack, and our guest, Penny Parker. They know of the situation at the factory, and can be trusted not to talk."

Though seemingly reluctant to make a report in the presence of the two youngsters, the detective nevertheless obeyed instructions.

"Since opening up the shop, I've been approached twice by a man from the factory," he began.

"That sweeper, called Joe?" interposed Mr. Parker.

"Yes, the first time he merely came into the place, looked around a bit, and finally asked me what I paid for brass."

"You didn't appear too interested?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"No, I gave him a price just a little above the market."

"How did it strike him?"

"He didn't have much to say, but I could tell he was interested."

"Did he offer you any brass?"

"No, he hinted he might be able to get me a considerable quantity of it later on."

"Feeling you out."

"Yes, I figure he'll be back. That's why I came here for instructions. If he shows up with the brass, shall I have him arrested?"

Mr. Parker waited for the factory owner to answer the question.

"Make a record of every transaction," Mr. Gandiss said. "Encourage the man to talk, and he may reveal

the names of others mixed up in the thefts. But make no arrests until we have more information."

"Very good, sir," the detective returned. "Unless the man is very crafty, I believe we may be able to trap him within a few weeks."

After Heiney had gone, Jack and Penny went down to the dock together to retie the *Spindrift*. The wind had shifted, and with the water level rising, the boat was bumping against its mooring post.

"By the way, Jack," said Penny as she unfastened one of the ropes to make it shorter, "I forgot to congratulate you upon winning the race this afternoon."

"Skip it," he replied grimly.

Penny glanced at him, wondering if her ears had deceived her.

"Why, I thought you were crazy-wild to win," she commented.

"Not that way." Jack kept his face averted as he tied a neat clove hitch. "I guess I made myself look like a heel, didn't I?"

For the first time Penny really felt sorry for the boy. Resisting a temptation to rub salt in his wounds, she said kindly:

"Well, I suppose you felt justified in asking for the trophy."

"I wish I hadn't done that, Penny. It's just that Sally gets me sometimes. She's so blamed cocky!"

"And she feels the same way about you. On the whole, though, I wonder if Sally has had a square deal?"

Jack straightened, staring at the *Spindrift* which tugged impatiently at her shortened ropes. Waves were beginning to lap over the dock boards.

"You mean about the factory?" he asked in a subdued voice.

Penny nodded.

"I never did think Sally was a thief," Jack said slowly. "Judging from Heiney Growski's report, someone may have planted the brass in her locker. Probably that fellow Joe, the Sweeper."

"Don't you feel she should be cleared?"

"How can we do anything without proof? This fellow Joe isn't convicted yet. Besides, he's only one of a gang. Sally could be involved, though I doubt it."

"You're not really convinced then?" Penny gazed at him curiously.

"Yes, I am," Jack answered after a slight hesitation. "Sally's innocent. I know that."

"Then why don't we do something about it?"

"What? My father has employed the best detectives already."

"At least you could tell Sally how you feel about it."

Jack kicked at the dock post with the toe of his ten-

nis shoe. "And have her tear into me like a wild cat?" he countered. "You don't know Sally."

"Are you so sure that you do?" Penny asked. Turning she walked swiftly away.

Jack came padding up the gravel path after her.

"Wait!" he commanded, grasping her by the arm. "So you think I've given Sally a raw deal?"

"I have no opinion in the matter," Penny returned, deliberately aloof.

"If I could do anything to prove Sally innocent you know I'd jump at the chance," Jack argued, trying to regain Penny's good graces.

"You really mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then why don't you try to get a little evidence against this man Joe, the Sweeper?" Penny proposed eagerly. "You visit the factory nearly every day. Keep your eyes and ears open and see what you can learn."

"Everyone knows who I am," Jack argued. "There wouldn't be a chance—" Meeting Penny's steady, appraising gaze, he broke off and finished: "Oh, okay, I'll do what I can, but it's useless."

"Not if you have a plan."

Jack stared at Penny with sudden suspicion. "Say, what are you leading up to anyhow?" he demanded. "Do *you* have one?"

"Not exactly. It just occurred to me that by watching at the gate of the factory when the employes leave, one might spot some of the men who are carrying off brass in their clothing."

Jack gave an amused snort. "Oh, that's been done. Company detectives made any number of checks."

"That's just the point," Penny argued. "They were factory employes, probably known to some of the workers."

"I'm even more widely recognized," Jack said. "Besides, Clayton, our gateman, has instructions to be on the watch for anyone who might try to carry anything away. He's reported several persons. When they were searched, nothing was found."

"Your gateman is entirely trustworthy?"

"Why not? He's an old employee."

Penny said no more, though she was thinking of the conversation overheard while at the factory gatehouse. Even if Jack took no interest, she decided she would try to do what she could herself. But there really seemed no place to begin.

"If you get any good ideas, I'll be glad to help," Jack said as if reading her thoughts. "Just to barge ahead without any plan, doesn't make sense to me."

Penny knew that he was right. Much as she desired to help clear Sally, she had no definite scheme in mind.

As the pair turned to leave the docks, they heard a

shout from across the water. The *Cat's Paw*, with canvas spread wide, was sailing before the wind, directly toward the island. Sally, at the tiller, signaled that she wanted to talk to them.

The boat came in like a house afire, but though the landing was fast, it was skillful. Sally looped a rope around the dock post, but did not bother to tie up.

"Penny," she said breathlessly. "I didn't get half a chance to thank you this afternoon for helping me in the race."

"I didn't do anything," Penny laughed. "I merely went along for the ride."

"That may be your story, but everyone who saw the race knows better. What I really came here for is to ask you to spend the night with me aboard the *River Queen*. We'll have a chance to get better acquainted."

The invitation caught Penny by surprise. Sally mistook her hesitation for reluctance.

"Probably you don't feel you want to leave here," she said quickly. "It was just one of those sudden ideas of mine."

"I want to come," Penny answered eagerly. "If Mr. and Mrs. Gandiss wouldn't mind. Wait and I'll ask."

Darting to the house, she talked over the matter with her father and then with her hostess. "By all means go," the latter urged. "I imagine you will en-

joy the experience. Jack can pick you up in the motorboat in the morning."

Packing her pajamas and a few toilet articles into a tight roll, Penny ran back to the dock. Jack and Sally were arguing about details of the afternoon race, but they abandoned the battle as she hurried up.

"Jack, you're to pick me up tomorrow morning," she advised him as she climbed aboard the *Cat's Paw*. "Don't forget."

The *River Queen* already had been anchored for the night in a quiet cove half a mile down river. With darkness approaching, lights were winking all along the shore. Across the river, the Gandiss factory was a blaze of white illumination. Farther downstream, the colored lights of an amusement park with a high roller coaster, cut a bright pattern in the sky.

Sally glanced for a moment toward the factory but made no mention of her unpleasant experience there. "Pop and I stay alone at night on the *Queen*," she explained as they approached the ferry. "Our crew is made up of men who live in town, so usually they go home after the six o'clock run."

Skillfully bringing the *Cat's Paw* alongside the anchored *Queen*, she shouted for her father to help Penny up the ladder. Making the smaller craft secure for the night, she followed her to the deck.

"What's cooking, Pop?" she asked, sniffing the air.

"Catfish," the captain answered as he went aft.

"Better get to the galley and tend to it, or we may not have any supper."

The catfish, sizzling in butter, was on the verge of scorching. Sally jerked the pan from the stove, and then with Penny's help, set a little built-in table which swung down from the cabin wall, and prepared the remainder of the meal.

Supper was not elaborate but Penny thought she had never tasted better food. The catfish was crisp and brown, and there were French fried potatoes and a salad to go with it. For dessert, Captain Barker brought a huge watermelon from the refrigerator, and they split it three ways.

"It's fun living on a ferryboat!" Penny declared enthusiastically as she and Sally washed the dishes. "I can't see why you ever would want to work in a factory when you can live such a carefree life here."

The remark was carelessly made. Penny regretted it instantly for she saw the smile leave Sally's face.

"I worked at the factory because I wanted to help make airplanes, and because Pop can't afford to give me much money," she explained quietly. "It was all a mistake. I realize that now."

"I'm sorry," Penny apologized, squeezing her hand. "I didn't mean to be so stupid. As far as your discharge is concerned, you'll be cleared."

"How?"

"Mr. Gandiss has detectives working on the case."

"Detectives!" Sally gave a snort of disgust. "Why, everyone in the plant knows who they are!"

After dishes were done, the girls went on deck. Protected from the night breezes by warm lap rugs, they sat listening to the lallup of the waves against the *River Queen.* Captain Barker's pipe kept the mosquitoes away and he talked reminiscently of his days as a boy on the waterfront.

Presently, the blast of a motorboat engine cut the stillness of the night. Sally, straightening in her chair, listened intently.

"There goes Jack again!" she observed, glancing at her father. "To the Harpers', no doubt."

The light of the boat became visible and Sally followed it with her eyes as it slowly chugged upstream.

"I was right!" she exclaimed a moment later.

Penny's curiosity was aroused, for she knew that Jack absented himself from home nearly every night, and that his actions were a cause of worry to his parents. "Who are the Harpers?" she inquired.

"Oh! they live across the river where you see those red and blue lights," Sally said, pointing beyond the railing. "The house stands on stilts over the water, and is a meeting place for the scum of the city!"

"Sally!" her father reproved.

"Well, it's the truth! Ma Harper and her no-account husband, Claude, run an outdoor dance pavil-

ion, but their income is derived from other sources too. Black market sales, for instance."

"Sally, your tongue is rattling like a chain!"

"Pop, you know very well the Harpers are trash."

"Nevertheless, don't make statements you can't prove."

Sally's outspoken remarks worried Penny because of their bearing upon Mr. Gandiss' son. "You don't think Jack is mixed up with the Harpers in black market dealings?" she asked.

"Oh, no!" Sally got up from the deck chair. "He goes there to have a good time. And if you ask me, Jack ought to stop being a playboy grasshopper!"

Captain Barker knocked ashes from his pipe and put it deep in his jacket pocket. "The shoe pinches," he told Penny with a wink. "Sally never learned to dance. I hear tell there's a girl who goes to the Harper shindigs that's an expert at jitter-bugging!"

"That has nothing to do with me!" Sally said furiously. "I'm going to bed!"

Captain Barker arose heavily from his chair. "How about the day's passenger receipts?" he asked. "Locked in the cabin safe?"

"Yes, we took in more than two hundred dollars today."

"That makes over five hundred in the safe," the captain said, frowning. "You'll have to take it to the

bank first thing in the morning. I don't like to have so much cash aboard."

Going to the cabin they were to share, Sally and Penny undressed and tumbled into the double-deck beds. The gentle motion of the boat and the slap of waves on the *Queen's* hull quickly lulled them to sleep.

How long Penny slumbered she did not know. But toward morning she awoke in darkness to find Sally shaking her arm.

"What is it?" Penny mumbled drowsily. "Time to get up?"

"Sh!" Sally warned. "Don't make a sound!"

Penny sat up in the bunk. Her friend, she saw, had started to dress.

"I think someone is trying to get aboard!" Sally whispered. "Listen!"

Penny could hear no unusual sound, only the wash of the waves.

"I distinctly heard a boat grate against the *Queen* only a moment ago," Sally pulled on her slacks and thrust her feet into soft-soled slippers which would make no sound. "I'm going on deck to investigate!"

Penny was out of bed in a flash. "Wait!" she commanded. "I'm going with you!"

Dressing with nervous haste, she tiptoed to the cabin door with Sally. Stealing through the dark corridors to the companionway, they could hear no unusual

sound. But midway up the steps, Sally's keen ears heard movement.

"Someone is in the lounge!" she whispered. "It may be Pop but I don't think so! Come on, and we'll see."

CHAPTER

13

THE STOLEN TROPHY

HAND IN hand the two girls tiptoed to the entrance-way of the lounge. Distinctly they could hear someone moving about in the darkness, and the sound came from the direction of a small cabin which the Barkers used as an office room.

"Pop!" Sally called sharply. "Is that you?"

She was answered only by complete silence. Then a plank creaked. The prowler was stealing stealthily toward the girls!

"Pop!" shouted Sally at the top of her lungs, groping to find a light switch.

Before she could illuminate the room, a man brushed past the two girls. Penny seized him by the coat. A sharp object pierced her finger. She was thrust back against the wall so hard that it knocked the breath from her. The man twisted, and jerking his coat free, dashed up the stairs.

"Pop!" Sally called again.

Captain Barker, armed with revolver and flashlight, came out of his cabin. By this time, Sally had found and turned on the light switch.

"A prowler!" she cried. "He ran up on deck."

"Stay below!" ordered the captain. "I'll get him!"

Penny and Sally had no intention of missing any of the excitement. Close at Captain Barker's heels, they darted up the companionway to the deck. To the starboard, the trio heard a slight splash, then the sound of steady dipping oars.

"Someone's getting away in a rowboat!" Sally cried.

Captain Barker ran to the railing. "Halt!" he shouted. "Halt or I'll fire!"

The man, a mere shadow in the mist arising from the river, rowed faster. Captain Barker fired two shots, purposely high. The man ducked down into the boat, and a moment later switched on an outboard motor, which rapidly carried him beyond view.

"Did you see who the fellow was, Sally?" the captain demanded wrathfully.

"No, it was too dark. Do you think he got away with the money in the safe?"

Fearing the worst, the trio descended to an office room adjoining the passenger lounge. A chair had been overturned there, but the door of the safe remained locked.

"You girls must have surprised him before he had time to steal the money," Captain Barker declared in

relief. "No harm done, but this is the first time in six years that anyone tried to sneak aboard the *Queen*. We'll have to keep a better watch from now on."

As the girls turned to leave the cabin, Sally saw that Penny was looking at the third finger of her right hand.

"Why, you're hurt!" she cried.

Penny's hand was smeared with blood which came from a tiny pin-prick wound on the finger.

"It's nothing," she insisted.

Sally ran to a cabinet for gauze, iodine and cotton. "How did it happen?" she asked.

"I tried to stop the prowler. As I grabbed his coat, something stuck my finger. It must have been a pin."

The wound was superficial and did not pain Penny. Sally wrapped the finger for her, and then after Captain Barker had said he would remain up for awhile, they returned to bed.

Throughout the night there were no further disturbances. At dawn the girls arose, feeling only a little tired as the result of their night's adventure. They had time for a quick swim in the river before breakfast and disgraced themselves by eating six pancakes each.

"The crew will be coming aboard soon," Sally said, glancing at her watch. "I usually sweep out the lounge and straighten up a bit before we make our first passenger run."

Penny, who had nothing to do until Jack could

come to take her back to the island, eagerly offered to help. Armed with brooms and dust rags, the girls went below.

In the doorway, Penny paused, staring at the overhead beam.

"Why, Sally," she commented in astonishment. "What did you do with the lantern trophy? Take it down?"

"No, it's still there."

Alarmed by Penny's question, Sally moved past her, gazing at the beam. Where the brass lantern had hung, there now was only a neatly severed chain.

"Why, it's gone!" she exclaimed in disbelief.

"Wasn't it here last night when we went to bed?"

"Of course."

"Then it was stolen last night!"

Dropping broom and dustpan, Sally brought a chair and inspected the chain. Obviously it had been cut by sharp metal scissors.

"That prowler who came aboard last night must have done it!" she exclaimed angrily. "Oh, what a mean, low trick!"

As the full realization of what the loss would mean came to her, Sally sank down on the chair, a picture of dejection.

"I'm responsible for the trophy, Penny! I'll be expected to produce it before the final race. Oh, what can we do?"

"Why do you suppose the thief took the lantern and nothing else?"

"Someone may have done it for pure spite. But I'm more inclined to think the person came aboard to steal our money in the office safe. The lantern hung here in a conspicuous place and he may have taken it on impulse."

Intending to notify Captain Barker of the loss, the girls started up the companionway. Abruptly, Penny paused, her attention drawn to an object lying on one of the steps. It was a circular badge with a picture and a number on it. No name. Such identifications, she knew, were used by many industrial plants.

"Where did this come from?" she murmured, picking it up.

The face on the badge was unfamiliar to her. The man had dark, bushy hair, sunken eyes and prominent cheekbones.

Sally turned to examine the identification pin. "Why, this badge came from the Gandiss factory!" she exclaimed, and studied the picture intently.

"Did you ever see the man before?"

"I can't place him, Penny. Yet I know I have seen him somewhere."

"The man should be easy to trace from this picture and number. When I caught hold of his clothing last night, I must have pulled off the pin. That was how my finger was pricked."

As the girls examined the pin, they heard a commotion on deck and the sound of voices. Before they could go up the steps to investigate, Jack Gandiss came clattering down to the lounge.

"I came to take you back to the island, Penny," he informed. "Ready?"

Then his gaze fastened upon the beam where the brass lantern had hung.

"Say, what became of the trophy?" he demanded sharply. "You decided to take it down after all?"

"It's gone," Sally said, misery in her voice. "Stolen!"

The two girls waited for the explosion, but strangely, Jack said nothing for a moment.

"You warned me," Sally hastened on. "Oh, it's all my fault. It was conceited and selfish of me to display the trophy here. I deserve everything you're going to say."

Still Jack remained mute, staring at the beam.

"Go on—tell me what you're thinking," Sally challenged miserably.

"It's a tough break," Jack said without rancor.

"This will practically ruin the race," Sally accused herself. "I can't replace the trophy for there's no other like it. An ordinary cup never would seem the same."

"That's so," Jack gloomily agreed. "Well, if it's gone, it's gone, and there's nothing more to be done."

The boy's calm acceptance of the calamity he had predicted, astonished Penny and Sally. Was this the Jack they knew? With a perfect opportunity to say, "I told you so," he had withheld blame.

Sally sank down on the lower step. "How will I face the racing committee?" she murmured. "What will the other contestants say? They'll feel like running me out of town."

"Maybe it won't be necessary to tell," Jack said slowly. "One of us is almost certain to win the race next Friday."

"Yes, that's true, but—"

"If you win, the lantern would be yours for keeps. Should I win, no one would need to know that you hadn't turned it over to me. You could make some excuse at the time of the presentation."

Sally gazed at Jack with a new light in her eyes. "I'm truly sorry for all the hateful things I've said to you in the past," she declared earnestly. "You're a true blue friend."

"Maybe I'm sorry about some of the cracks I made too," he grinned, extending his hand. "Shake?"

Sally sprang up and grasped the hand firmly, but her eyes were misty. She hastened to correct any wrong impression Jack might have gained.

"I'm glad you made the offer you did," she said, "but I never would dream of keeping the truth from the committee. I'll notify them today."

"Why be in such a hurry?" Penny asked. "The race is a week away. In that time we may be able to find the trophy. After all, we have a good clue."

"What clue?" asked Jack.

Penny showed him the pin. As he gazed at the picture on the face of the badge, a strange expression came into his eyes.

"You know the man?" Penny asked instantly.

"He works at our factory. But that's not where I've seen him."

"At the Harpers?" Sally asked.

"Yes," Jack admitted unwillingly. "I don't know his name, but he is a friend of Ma Harper and her husband."

"And of that no-account Joe, the Sweeper?"

"I don't know about that." The questioning had made Jack uncomfortable.

"The man should be arrested!"

"We have no proof, Sally," Penny pointed out. "While we're satisfied in our own minds that the man who took the lantern is the person who lost the badge, we can't be certain."

"The badge may have been dropped by a passenger yesterday," Jack added. "Let me find out this fellow's name first, and a few facts about him."

"I don't believe your friends, the Harpers, will tell you much," Sally said stiffly. "They're the scum of the waterfront. How you can go there—"

Penny, who saw that another storm was brewing, quickly intervened, saying it was time she and Jack started for the island. Sally, taking the hint, allowed the subject to drop.

But as she went on deck to see the pair off in Jack's motorboat, she whispered to Penny:

"See me this afternoon, if you can. I have an idea I don't want Jack to know about. If we work together, we may be able to trace the trophy."

CHAPTER

14

TRAPPED

JACK HAD little to say about the theft as he and Penny returned to the Gandiss home. However, after lunch he offered to go to his father's factory to learn the identity of the employee who had lost the badge aboard the *River Queen.*

"Want to come along?" he invited.

Ordinarily, Penny would have welcomed the opportunity, but remembering that Sally had wished to see her, she regretfully turned down the invitation.

"I'll ride across the river if you don't mind," she said. "I have an errand in town."

By this time Penny was familiar with the daily route of the *River Queen* and knew where it would dock to pick up and unload passengers. Sally, she felt certain, would be aboard, expecting her.

They crossed the river in the motorboat, making an appointment to meet again at four o'clock. After Jack had gone, Penny set off for the *River Queen's*

dock where a sizable group of passengers awaited the ferry.

Soon the *Queen* steamed in, her bell signaling a landing. Passengers crowded the railing, eager to be the first off. A crewman stood at the wheel, and Sally was nowhere to be seen.

As the boat brushed the dock, sailors leaped off to make fast to the dock posts. Captain Barker, annoyed because the passengers were pushing, bellowed impatient orders to his men: "All right, start that gangplank forward! Lively! Are you going to sleep over it all day?"

Then, seeing Penny, he raised his hand in friendly greeting.

"Is Sally aboard?" she called to him.

"No, she went up the shore a ways—didn't say where," the captain replied, waving his hand upriver. "Ought to be back here any minute."

Sally, however, did not appear, and the *Queen* pulled away without her. Penny loitered on the dock for twenty minutes. The sun was hot and with nothing to do, time lay heavy upon her. It lacked a half hour before the *River Queen* would return, and fully two hours before she was due to meet Jack. For lack of occupation, she walked upriver along the docks.

Buildings were few and far between. There were several fish houses, a boat rental place and the half-deserted amusement park. The beach beyond made

easy walking, so Penny kept on. With quickening interest she saw that she was approaching a two-story building which appeared to stand on stilts over the water. Close by was a large, smoothly cemented area with overhead lights.

"That's the Harper place!" Penny recognized it. "With the dance area adjoining."

She moved on along the beach. Drawing closer to the building, she passed a clump of bushes fringing the sand. The leaves stirred slightly though there was no breeze. Penny failed to notice the movement.

But as she passed the bushes, a hand reached out and grasped her ankle.

Startled, Penny uttered a nervous cry.

"Be quiet, you goon!" a familiar voice bade.

It was Sally Barker crouched amid the foliage. Quickly she pulled Penny with her behind the bushes.

"Sally, what are you doing here?" Penny demanded.

"Watching that house. I saw you a long way down the beach."

"Anything doing?"

"A boat is coming in now. That's why I didn't want you to be seen."

A rowboat with an outboard, rapidly approached the Harper pier. Already it was making a wide sweep preparatory to a landing.

"Why, it's that fellow, Joe the Sweeper!" Penny ex-

claimed, peering out from the hiding place. "Who is steering the boat?"

"Claude Harper," Sally revealed. "Ma Harper's husband."

"Wonder what Joe would be doing here?"

"That's what I'd like to know myself," Sally returned grimly. "Joe isn't as stupid as he's given credit for being. He's crafty and mean, and being mixed up with the Harpers is no recommendation."

While the girls watched, the boat landed. The two men tied up the craft, and removing a burlap sack which apparently was filled with something heavy, carried it into the two-story house.

"I wish we knew what they brought here," Penny said. "Why not try to find out?"

"How?"

"Couldn't we sneak up to the house and peek in one of the windows?"

"We might be caught."

"True, but we'll learn nothing more here."

Debating a moment, the girls emerged from their hiding place. To reach the house they were compelled to cross an open stretch of beach. However, no one was to be seen outside the dwelling and their arrival appeared to attract no notice of anyone inside.

"How about that window at the east side?" Penny suggested.

The one she pointed out was half screened by

bushes and at a level which would permit them to peer inside.

"Okay," agreed Sally, "but I'd hate to be caught at this business. The Harpers hate me and they would be mighty unpleasant if they came upon us snooping."

"What a harsh word!" chuckled Penny. "All this comes under the heading of investigation! The only difference is that Mr. Gandiss' detectives are paid and we aren't."

"If I could get the brass lantern back that would be pay enough for me," Sally returned.

Creeping to the window, the girls cautiously peeped into the house. The panes were so dirty it was hard to see inside. But they were able to distinguish three persons sitting at a living room table. Papers were spread out before them, and they were adding figures. There was no sign of the sack which had been carried into the house.

"Who are they?" Penny asked her companion.

"Joe the Sweeper, Ma Harper and her husband. Another woman is coming into the room now. But she's only a stupid houseworker Ma hires by the week."

Sally moved backwards, intending to give Penny her place at the window. Inadvertently, she stepped on a stick which broke in two with a snap. Though the sound was not loud, it apparently was heard by those inside the house.

For immediately Claude Harper shoved back his chair and started toward the window.

"What was that?" the girls heard him mutter. "I thought I heard someone outside."

"Quick! Crouch down or he'll see us!" Penny warned, pulling Sally to the ground.

Claude Harper, a sallow-faced man in dirty leather jacket, appeared at the window. To the alarm of the girls, he thrust up the sash. In plain view, should he peer down over the ledge, they held their breath.

The man, however, gazed toward the boat docks. "I don't see anyone," he reported to his companions. "I was sure I heard something—" he broke off, ending sharply: "And I did too!"

"What is it, Claude?" his wife called.

"Anyone been here this afternoon?" he demanded.

"Nary a soul until you came."

"Take a look at those shoetracks in the sand!"

Hearing the words, Penny and Sally gazed behind them. From the bush on the beach to the wall where they crouched, led a telltale trail.

"I'll go outside and look around!" Harper said to his wife. He slammed down the window.

"We're sunk!" Sally moaned. "We can't run across the beach without being seen, and we're certain to be caught here."

Keeping close to the wall, treading in firm earth which left no visible shoemarks, the girls crept around

the building corner. The slamming of a door warned them that Claude Harper already was on their trail.

"Someone's been here by the window!" they heard him shout.

Frantically, the girls looked about for a place to hide. There was no shrubbery nearby, only the waterfront. Penny's desperate gaze fastened upon the rowboat tied up at the pier nearby. In the bottom lay an old canvas sail.

"Quick! The boat!" she whispered to Sally.

"We'll be caught there sure!"

"It's even more certain if we stay here. Come on, it's our only chance."

Choosing the lesser of two evils, they tiptoed across the pier. Though many of the boards were rotten and loose, their shoes fortunately made no sound.

Scrambling down into the boat, the girls jerked the canvas sail over them. Barely had they hidden themselves, than their hearts sank, for they heard heavy footsteps approaching on the pier.

CHAPTER

15

UNDER THE SAIL

THAT CLAUDE HARPER was searching for them, the girls did not doubt. But though he knew someone had been peering in the window, they were hopeful he had not actually seen them. Huddling beneath the sail in the bottom of the boat, they nervously waited.

The man came farther out on the pier, the boards creaking beneath his weight. At any instant the girls expected to have the sailcloth jerked from their heads. However, Harper's attention was diverted as Sweeper Joe came out of the house.

"Find anyone?" the factory worker asked.

"No, but tracks lead to the window. Someone's been spying."

"Kids probably."

"I don't know about that," Claude Harper returned gruffly. "I'd feel a lot safer if we didn't have all that stuff in the basement. What's our chances of getting rid of it tonight?"

"We can't do it. Tomorrow or next night maybe. Arrangements have got to be made, and if we try to push things, we'll end up in a jam."

The voices faded away, though not entirely. Presently daring to peep from beneath the canvas, Penny saw that the two men had seated themselves on the rear steps of the house at the edge of the river and within plain view of the tied-up boat.

"We're in a nice position now!" she whispered to Sally. "Suppose they sit there until they decide to leave in this boat?"

"We'll be caught. We're the same as trapped now unless they go back into the house."

The two men showed no inclination to leave. They talked earnestly together, evidently making plans of some sort. Though the girls tried hard to overhear, they could catch only an occasional word. After awhile, Ma Harper, a wiry, ugly woman with stringy black hair, came outdoors to join the men on the steps.

"It's getting late," she warned. "If you're goin' to tend to that job today, you'll have to be gettin' across the river. Ain't you due to show up for work at four o'clock, Joe?"

"That's right," the man yawned, getting up. "I'll be glad when I can chuck the whole business and live without workin'."

Though Penny and Sally did not hear much of the

conversation, it was evident to them that the men were about ready to make use of the boat.

"We're sunk," Sally whispered fearfully. "Maybe we ought to climb out of here and make a dash for it."

Penny offered a better idea. "Why not untie the rope, and let the boat drift off?" she proposed. "The current is swift and should carry us downstream fairly fast."

"Any other boat around that they can use to follow us in?"

"I don't see any." Penny raised the sail a little higher as she gazed along the pier and nearby beach.

"All right, then do your stuff," Sally urged.

While she held the sail slightly above Penny's head so that no movement would be discernible to those on the house steps, the latter reached her hands from beneath the cloth and swiftly untied the rope. The boat began to drift away. Covered by the sail, the girls lay motionless and flat on the craft's bottom.

At first nothing happened. But as they began to hope that the men would not notice the drifting boat, they heard an explosive shout.

"Look!" Claude Harper exclaimed. "Our boat!"

"Jumpin' fish hooks!" Sweeper Joe muttered. "How did that happen? I tied 'er secure."

"It looks like it," the other retorted sarcastically. "I can't afford to lose that boat."

The girls could hear running footsteps on the pier and boardwalk near the dance pavilion. Sally dared to peep from beneath the canvas again.

"They're after a motorboat!" she reported tensely. "Harper has one he keeps locked in a boathouse."

"How close are we to the bend in the river?"

"About twenty yards."

The swift current was doing its best for the girls, swinging their boat toward the bend. Once beyond it, they would be temporarily hidden from the pier. But the current also was tending to carry them farther and farther from shore.

"Do we dare row?" Penny asked nervously.

"Not yet. Harper is having trouble getting the engine of his boat started," Sally reported. "We'll be safe for a minute or two. We're getting closer to the bend."

To the nervous girls, the boat scarcely seemed to move. Then at last it passed the bend and they were screened by willow trees and bushes.

"Now!" Sally signalled in a tense whisper.

Throwing off the sail, they seized oars and paddled with all their strength.

"Quiet!" Sally warned as Penny's oar made a splash. "Sounds carry plainly over the water."

The blast of a motorboat engine told them that Harper and his companion had started in pursuit.

Only a minute or two would be required for them to round the bend.

Throwing caution to the winds, Sally and Penny dug in with their oars, shooting their craft toward shore. The boat grated softly on the sand. Instantly, the girls leaped out, splashing through ankle-deep water.

As Sally was about to start across the beach, Penny seized her hand.

"We mustn't leave a trail of footprints this time!" she warned.

Treading a log at the water's edge, Penny walked its length to firm ground which took no visible shoe print. Sally followed her to a clump of bushes where they crouched and waited.

Barely had they taken cover when the motorboat came into view, heading for the little cove. There Claude Harper recaptured the runaway rowboat, tying it to the stern of the other craft.

Suddenly Penny was dismayed as she realized that in their flight, a most important detail had been overlooked.

"The oars!" she whispered. "They're wet!"

"Maybe the men won't see," Sally said hopefully. "We left them half covered by the canvas."

Intent only upon returning to the pier, Claude Harper and his companion failed to notice anything

amiss. Apparently assuming the boat had been carelessly tied and had drifted away under its own power, they were not suspicious.

"That was a narrow squeak," Penny sighed in relief as the motorboat with the other craft in tow finally disappeared around the bend. "The oars will quickly dry in the sun, so I guess we're safe."

Now that they were well out of trouble, the adventure seemed fun. Penny glanced at her wristwatch, observing that it was past four o'clock.

"Jack will be waiting for me," she said to Sally. "I'll have to hurry."

"We'll have plenty of time," Sally returned carelessly. "You usually can count on Jack being half an hour late for appointments."

Walking swiftly along the deserted shore, the girls discussed what they had overheard at the Harpers.

"We stirred up a big fuss and didn't learn too much," Penny said regretfully. "All the same, it looks as if the Harpers and Sweeper Joe are mixed up in this brass business together."

"They spoke of having something stored in the basement. That is what interests me. Oh, Penny, if only we could go back there sometime when the Harpers are gone and really investigate!"

"Maybe we can."

Sally shook her head. "Ma Harper almost never

goes away from home. But sometimes she has streams of visitors from Osage—mostly women. I've often wondered why."

"Factory girls?"

"No, they're housewives and every type of person. I think Mrs. Harper must be selling something to them, but I never could figure it out."

The *River Queen* was at the far side of the river, so Sally, for lack of occupation, walked on with Penny to the dock where she was to meet Jack. Greatly to their surprise, he was there ahead of them, and evidently had been waiting for some length of time.

Seeing the girls, he slowly arose to his feet.

"Well, Jack, what did you learn at the factory?" Penny asked eagerly.

"Why, not much of anything."

"You mean you weren't able to find out the name of the man who dropped his badge aboard the *Queen?*" Penny asked incredulously.

"Of course you learned the name if you really tried," Sally added. "Every single badge used at your factory would be recorded!"

Thus trapped, Jack said lamely: "Oh, I learned his name all right. Take it easy, and I'll tell you."

CHAPTER

16

SILK STOCKINGS

PUZZLED BY Jack's behavior and his evident reluctance to reveal what he had learned, Penny and Sally sat down beside him on the dock. At their urging he said:

"Well, I traced the number through our employment office. The badge was issued to a worker named Adam Glowershick."

Neither of the girls ever had heard of the name, but Sally, upon studying the picture again, was sure she recalled having seen him as a passenger aboard the *River Queen.*

"He's a punch press operator," Jack added.

"And he's the man you thought you knew?" Penny asked curiously.

"Yes. As I told you, I've seen him at the Harpers." Jack acted ill at ease.

The girls exchanged a quick glance. But they did not tell Jack of their recent adventure.

"Well, why don't we have the fellow arrested?" Sally demanded after a moment of silence. "I'm satisfied he stole the brass lantern. He probably came aboard for money, and unable to get into the safe, took the trophy for meanness."

"Or he may be mixed up with the gang of factory brass thieves," Penny supplied.

"You can't prove a case against a man, because he might have dropped the badge anytime he happened to be a passenger aboard the ferry," Jack said. "It would do no good to have him booked on suspicion."

"Is he a friend of yours?" Sally asked significantly.

"Of course not!"

"Jack is right about it," Penny interposed hastily. "We need more information before we ask police to make an arrest. Any other news, Jack?"

"Nothing startling. But you know that detective your father brought here from Riverview?"

"Heiney?"

"Yes, he reported today that Sweeper Joe contacted him again, offering to sell a large quantity of brass. An appointment has been made for the delivery Friday night. If it proves to be stolen brass, then he's trapped himself."

"Can they prove it's the same brass?"

"Heiney numbers and records every piece he buys. He should be able to establish a case."

Knowing that her father had intended to keep the

junkman's activities a secret, Penny was disturbed by Jack's talking in public. Evidently he had gleaned this latest information from his father. She was even more troubled by his attitude toward Adam Glowershick.

Presently saying goodbye to Sally, she and Jack returned to Shadow Island. A strange boat was tied up in the berth usually occupied by the *Spindrift.* Since the sailboat was nowhere along the dock, it was evident that Mr. Gandiss, his wife, and Mr. Parker had gone for an outing on the river.

"We seem to have a visitor," Penny remarked.

Jack said nothing, but intently studied the man who slouched near the boathouse, hat pulled low to shade his eyes from the sun glare.

"Why, isn't that the same fellow whose picture was on the factory badge!" Penny exclaimed. "Adam Glowershick!"

"Careful or he'll hear you," Jack warned, scowling. "I know this man. He's here to see me."

Penny gazed again at the stranger who had dark bushy hair and prominent cheekbones. "If that isn't Glowershick, it's his twin!" she thought, and asked Jack if he had the factory badge with him.

"No, I haven't," he answered irritably. "Furthermore, I wish you would cut out such wild speculation. He'll hear you."

Jack brought the boat in. Leaping ashore, he asked

Penny to fasten the ropes. "I'll be back in a minute," he flung at her as he strode off.

It took time to make the craft secure. When Penny glanced up from her work, Jack and the stranger had disappeared behind the boathouse.

"Queer how fast Jack ducked out of here," she thought.

More than a little annoyed by the boy's behavior, Penny started up the gravel path to the house. Midway there she heard footsteps, and turning, saw Jack hastening after her.

"Penny—" he began diffidently.

She waited for him to go on.

"I hate to ask this," he said uncomfortably, "but how are you fixed for money?"

"I have a little. Dad gave me a fairly large sum to spend when we came here."

"Could you let me have twenty dollars? It would only be a loan for a few days. I—I wouldn't ask it, only I need it badly."

"Dad only gave me twenty-five, Jack."

"I'll pay you back in just a few days, Penny. Honest I will."

"I'll help you out of your jam," Penny agreed unwillingly, "but something tells me I shouldn't do it. Your parents—"

"Don't say anything to them about it," Jack pleaded. "My father gives me a good allowance, and

if he knew I had spent all of it ahead, he'd have a fit."

Penny went to her room for the money, returning with four crisp five dollar bills. She had planned to buy a new dress but now it must wait.

"Thanks," Jack said gratefully, fairly snatching the money from her hand. "Oh, yes, another favor—please don't mention to my folks that anyone was here today."

"Who is the man, Jack?"

"Oh, just a fellow I met." The boy started moving away. Penny, however, pursued him down the path.

"Not so fast, Jack. Since I have a financial interest in your affairs now, it's only fair that I ask a few questions. Did you meet this man at the Harpers?"

"What if I did?"

"Now you're in debt to him and he's pressing you for money. You don't want your parents to know."

"Something like that," Jack muttered, avoiding her steady gaze.

"I don't like being a party to anything I fail to understand. Jack, if you expect me to keep quiet about this, you'll have to make a promise."

"What is it?"

"That you'll not go to the Harpers' again."

"Okay, I'll promise," Jack agreed promptly. "The truth is, I've had enough of the place. Now, is the lecture concluded?"

"Quite finished," Penny replied.

With troubled eyes she watched Jack return to the boathouse and hand her money to the bushy-haired stranger.

"Maybe that fellow isn't Glowershick," she thought, "but he certainly looks like the picture. If Jack should be mixed up with those brass thieves—"

Penny deliberately dismissed the idea from her mind. A guest of the Gandiss' family, she could not permit herself to distrust Jack. He was inclined to be wild, irresponsible and at times arrogant, yet she had never questioned his basic character. Even though it disturbed her to know that he had given money to the stranger, she refused to believe that he was dishonest or that he would betray his father's trust.

If Penny hoped that Jack would offer a complete explanation for his actions, she was disappointed. After the stranger had gone, he deliberately avoided her. And that night at dinner, he had very little to say.

When the meal was finished, Jack roved restlessly about the house, not knowing what to do with himself. "I hope you're planning on staying home tonight," his mother commented. "Lately, you've scarcely spent an evening here."

"There's nothing to do on an island," Jack complained. "I thought I might run in to town for an hour or so."

He met Penny's gaze and amended hastily: "On

second thought, I guess I won't. How about an exciting game of chess?"

The evening was dull, heightened only by Mr. Gandiss' discussion of the latest difficulties at the factory. Another large quantity of brass had disappeared, he revealed to Mr. Parker.

"Perhaps our detectives will solve the mystery eventually," he declared, "but I'm beginning to lose heart. The firm has lost $60,000 already, and the thieves become bolder each day. At the start, only a small ring operated. Now I am convinced at least ten or fifteen employes may be in on the scheme to defraud me."

"The brass must be smuggled past the gateman," Mr. Parker commented thoughtfully.

"We have three of them," Mr. Gandiss replied. "Several persons have been turned in, but nothing ever could be proved against any individual who was searched."

Deeply interested in her father's remark, Penny kept thinking about Clark Clayton, the night-shift gateman, and his apparent friendship with Sweeper Joe. Late the next afternoon when she knew he would be on duty, she purposely arrived at the factory just as a large group of employes was leaving.

Though at his usual post, Clark Clayton did not appear especially alert. As employes filed past him, he

paid them no special heed. Several persons who carried bulky packages were not even stopped for inspection.

"Why, a person could carry a ton of brass through that gate and he wouldn't know the difference!" she thought.

Making no attempt to enter the grounds, Penny watched for a while. Then she hailed a taxi cab, and told the driver to take her to the river.

They were nearing the docks when the man, glancing back over his shoulder, said carelessly: "How would you like to buy some genuine silk stockings?"

"How would I like to stake out a claim to part of the moon!" Penny countered, scarcely knowing how to take the question.

"No, I'm serious," the cab driver went on, slowing the taxi to idling pace. "I know a woman along the river who has a pretty fair stock of genuine silk stockings. Beauties."

"Black market?" Penny asked with disapproval.

"Well, no, I wouldn't call it that," the man argued. "She had a supply of these stockings and wants to get rid of them. Nothing wrong in that. Five dollars a pair."

"Five dollars a pair!" Penny echoed, barely keeping her temper.

"If I took you there, she might let you have them for a dollar less."

Penny opened her lips to tell the black market "runner" what she thought of a person who would engage in such illegal business. Then she closed them again and did a little quick thinking. After all, it might be wise to learn where the place was and then report to the police.

"Well, I don't know," she said, pretending to hesitate. "I'd like to have a pair of silk stockings, but I haven't much money with me. Where is the place?"

"Not far from here along the river. I'll drive you there, and if you make a purchase, you needn't pay me any fare."

"All right, that's fair enough. Let's go," Penny agreed.

As they rattled along the street, she carefully memorized the cab's number, and took mental notes on the driver's appearance, intending to report him to police. No doubt he received a generous commission for bringing customers to the establishment, she reasoned.

The cab had not gone far when it began to slacken pace. Peering out, Penny was astonished to see that they were stopping in front of the Harper house, overlooking the river.

"Is this the place?" she gasped, as the driver swung open the door. "I—I don't believe I want to go in after all. I thought you were taking me to a shop."

"You can't get silk stockings anywhere else in the county," the driver said. "Not like the kind Ma

Harper sells. Just go on in and tell her I brought you. She'll treat you right."

Taking Penny by the elbow, he half pulled her from the cab and started her toward the shabby, unpainted dwelling.

CHAPTER

17

BASEMENT LOOT

WHILE THE cab driver waited, Penny crossed the sagging porch and rapped on the door. Evidently the taxi's approach had been noted, for almost at once Ma Harper appeared.

She was a tall, thin woman, sallow of face, and with a hard glint to her eyes. Penny was not in the least deceived by the smile that was bestowed upon her.

"Hello, deary," the woman greeted her, stepping aside for her to enter. "Did Ernst bring you to buy something?"

"He spoke of silk stockings," Penny returned cautiously. "I'm not sure that I'll care to purchase them."

"Oh, you will when you see them, deary," Ma Harper declared in a chirpy tone. "Just come in and I'll show them to you."

"Aren't genuine silk stockings hard to get now?"

"I don't know of any place they can be bought except here. I was lucky to lay in a good supply before

the start of the war. Only one or two pairs are left now, but I'll let you have them, deary."

"That's very kind of you," returned Penny with dry humor.

"The stockings cost me plenty," went on the woman, motioning for the girl to seat herself on a sagging davenport. "I'll have to ask five dollars a pair."

She eyed Penny speculatively to note how the figure struck her. Penny had no intention of making a purchase at any price, but to keep the conversation rolling, she pretended to be interested.

"Five dollars ain't much when you consider you can't get stockings like these anywhere else," the woman added. "Just wait here, deary, and I'll bring 'em out." She went quickly from the room.

Left alone, Penny gazed with curiosity at the crude furnishings. Curtains hung at the windows, but they had not been washed in many months. The rug also was soiled and threadbare. The main piece of furniture, a table, stood in the center of the room.

Double doors opened out upon a balcony above the river. Wandering outside, Penny could see the *River Queen* plying its way far downstream. Closer by, a small boat with an outboard approached.

Due to the glare of a late afternoon sun on the water, she could not at first distinguish its two occupants. The boat, however, looked familiar.

"That's the same boat Sally and I escaped in yesterday!" she thought. "And it's coming here!"

Nearer and nearer the craft approached, until Penny could see the men's faces plainly. One was Sweeper Joe and the other, Clark Clayton, gateman at the Gandiss factory.

"If they see me here, they're certain to be suspicious!" Penny thought in panic. "They'll remember having seen me with Mr. Gandiss at the factory. I'll skip while the skipping is good!"

She turned to find Ma Harper standing in the doorway. "Anything wrong, deary?" the woman asked in a soft purr.

"Why, no," Penny stammered. "I—I was just admiring the river view."

"You were lookin' at that boat so funny-like I thought maybe you knew the men. Sure there ain't nothing wrong?"

"Of course not!" Penny was growing decidedly uncomfortable. She tried to slip through the doorway, but Ma Harper did not move aside.

"It's getting late," Penny said, glancing at her wrist watch. "Perhaps I should come some other time to look at the stockings. Shall we say tomorrow?"

"I have the hosiery right here, deary. Beauties, ain't they?"

Ma Harper spread one of the filmy stockings over her rough, callous hand. The silk was fine and beauti-

ful, unquestionably pre-war and of black market origin.

"Yes, they are lovely," Penny said nervously. "But the truth is, I haven't five dollars with me. I'll have to come back later."

Ma Harper's dark eyes snapped angrily.

"Then what you been takin' my time for?" she demanded. "Say—" she accused with sudden suspicion, her gaze roving to the boat which now was close to the pier. "—you seem in a mighty big hurry to get away from here all at once!"

"Why, no, it's just that the taxi man is waiting, and it's getting late."

"What's your name anyhow?"

"Penny Parker."

"Where do you live?"

"I am a summer vacationist."

The answers only partially satisfied Ma Harper. Evidently she was afraid that Penny might be an investigator, for she debated a moment. Then she said: "You wait here until I talk to someone."

"But I really must be leaving."

"You wait here, I said!" Ma Harper snapped. "Maybe you're okay, but I ain't takin' no chances on you getting me into trouble about these stockings. Wait until I talk to Joe."

Leaving Penny on the balcony, she went out by way of the front living room door. After it had

closed, there was a sharp little click which made the girl fear she had been locked in.

The truth was quickly ascertained. The door was locked. For an instant, Penny was frightened, but she told herself she was not really a prisoner. There were windows she could unfasten, and another door at the rear of the house.

Intending to test it, she went quickly through the kitchen. Voices reached her ears. Evidently Ma Harper and the two men were standing close to the door, and although speaking in low tones she could hear most of the conversation.

"The girl may be all right, but I think she was sent here to spy!" Ma reported. "If we let her go, she may bring the police down on us!"

"And if you try to hold her here, you'll soon be in trouble!" one of the men answered. Penny thought the voice was that of Clark Clayton. "You and this petty stocking business of yours! We warned you to lay off it."

"Sure, blame me!" Ma's voice rose angrily. "The truth is, you're getting scared of your own racket. I was sellin' stockings and makin' a good, safe income until you come along and talked my husband into lettin' you store your loot in our basement. Well, I've made up my mind! You're gettin' the stuff out of here tonight, and you're not bringing any more in!"

"Okay, okay," growled Sweeper Joe. "Just take

it easy, and quit your yippin'. We'll move the stuff as soon as it gets dark. Fact is, we've made a deal with a guy that runs a junk shop near the factory. He's offered us a good price. We had to play along slow and easy to be sure he wasn't tied up with the cops."

"What about the girl?" Ma demanded. "If I let her go, she's apt to get me into hot water about those stockings."

"That's your funeral," Joe the Sweeper retorted. "If you'd handled her right, she wouldn't have become suspicious."

The discussion went on, in lower tones. Then Penny heard Ma say:

"Okay, that's the way we'll do it. I'll think up some story to convince the girl. But that brass must be out of here tonight! Another thing, you can't sell the lantern that simpleton, Adam Glowershick, stole from the *River Queen*."

"Why not?" Sweeper Joe demanded. "There's good brass in it."

"You stupid lout!" Ma exclaimed, losing patience. "That lantern is known to practically every person along the waterfront. Let it show up in a pawnshop or second hand store, and the police would trace it straight to us. You'll have to heave it into the river."

"Okay, maybe you're right," the factory worker admitted.

Penny had learned enough to feel certain that brass, stolen piecemeal from the Gandiss factory, had been stored in the Harper basement. Even more astonishing was the information that the trophy taken from the *River Queen* also was somewhere in the house.

"If the lantern is thrown into the river, no one ever be able to recover it," she thought. "If only I could get it now and sneak away through a window!"

Penny's pulse stepped up a pace, for she knew that to venture into the basement was foolhardy. She listened again at the door. Ma and the men still were talking, but how long they would continue to do so, she could not guess.

"I'll risk it," she decided.

The basement door opened from an inside wall of the kitchen. Penny groped her way down the steep, dark stairs but could find no light switch.

The cellar room was damp and dirty. As her eyes became accustomed to the dim light which filtered in through two small windows, she saw a furnace surrounded by buckets of ashes and boxes of papers and trash. A clothes line was hung with stockings and silk underwear.

Penny poked into several of the boxes and barrels. All were empty. Then her gaze focused upon another door, which apparently led into a fruit or storage room. It was padlocked.

"The brass is locked in there!" she thought, her heart sinking. "The lantern too! How stupid of me not to expect it."

Without tools, Penny could not hope to break into the locked room. There was only one thing to do. She must get away from the house, and bring the police!

Starting up the stairs, she stopped short. An outside door had slammed. In the room above she heard footsteps, but no voices.

Frightened, Penny remained motionless on the basement stairs. She could hear Ma Harper tramping about, evidently in search of her, for the woman muttered angrily to herself.

"I don't dare stay here," the girl thought. "I'll have to make a dash for it."

Penny reasoned that in reentering the house, Ma Harper probably had left the front door unlocked. What had become of the two men she did not know, but she would have to take a chance on their whereabouts.

Noiselessly, she crept up the stairs to the kitchen door, opening it a tiny crack. Though she could not see Ma, footsteps told her that the woman had stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the river.

"This will be as good a chance as I may get," she reasoned.

The door squeaked as she opened it wide enough

to slip through. Unnerved by the sound, Penny moved swiftly across the kitchen to the living room.

"So there you are!" cried Ma Harper from the balcony.

Penny threw caution to the winds. Darting across the room, she jerked at the outside door. It opened, but on the porch, facing her, stood Sweeper Joe and Clark Clayton!

CHAPTER

18

OVER THE BALCONY

PANIC-STRICKEN, Penny's first thought was to try to dart past the men. But she realized that to do so would be impossible. Warned by Ma Harper's excited cries, they had moved into position to completely block her path.

"Stop that girl!" shouted Ma Harper, bearing down upon her from the direction of the river balcony. "She's from the police and sent here to get evidence!"

Whirling around, Penny ran back toward the kitchen, with the woman in pursuit. She did not waste time testing the rear door, for she already knew it to be locked.

However, opening from the kitchen was another closed door which appeared to give exit. With no time to debate, Penny jerked it open and darted inside.

Instantly, she saw that she had made a serious mistake. She had entered a small washroom and had

trapped herself. And Ma Harper was practically upon her.

Penny did the only possible thing. She slammed the door and turned the key in the lock. For a moment at least, she was beyond reach.

"I've really trapped myself now!" she thought, recapturing her breath. "What a mess! If I had used my head this wouldn't have happened."

Penny sat down on the edge of the bathtub to think. Already Ma Harper was pounding and thumping on the flimsy wooden door panel. The door rattled on its hinges.

"You open up or I'll break down the door!" the woman shouted furiously. "You hear me?"

Penny did not answer. There was no escape from the washroom for it had no window. The tub upon which she sat was ringed with dirt, evidently having seen no use in many weeks. Above her head stretched a short clothesline upon which hung a row of Ma Harper's stockings.

"You let me in!" Ma Harper shouted again. "If I ever lay hands on you, you'll pay for this!"

The threat left Penny entirely unmoved. She had no intention of opening the door, no matter what the woman might say or do.

Realizing that her tactics were gaining nothing, Ma tried another approach.

"Please let me in," she coaxed in a falsely sweet

voice. "We won't hurt you. If you come out now, we'll let you go home just as you want to do."

Penny was not to be so easily taken in. She remained silent.

Ma Harper lost her temper completely then. She kicked at the door and shouted for the two men.

"Joe! Clark! Come and help me get this brat out of here!"

Penny, certain that her moments of freedom were limited, heard the two men approach. A heavy body heaved itself against the door, but still the lock held.

"I don't want my door smashed," she heard Ma Harper whine. "Can't you get a screwdriver and take off the hinges? There ain't no other key in the house."

The reply of the men was inaudible, but Penny heard their retreating footsteps. The door knob kept rattling, so she decided Ma Harper had been left there to keep watch.

"This probably is my only chance to escape!" Penny reasoned. "I might unlock the door and take a chance on overpowering Ma Harper. But she's a strong woman!"

Her roving gaze fastened upon the line of drying stockings, and suddenly she had an idea! Jerking one of the stockings down, she seized a thick bar of soap from the dish above the bathtub, and crammed it deep into the toe of the stocking.

"This will make a superb weapon!" she thought gleefully. "Almost as good as a blackjack!"

Taking a firm grip on the stocking, Penny swung it several times to be certain of its possibilities. Then she was ready.

Quickly she unlocked the door and stepped back. For a moment nothing happened. Then Ma Harper pushed it open, just as she had expected.

"Now I'll get you!" she screamed, springing at Penny.

Penny kept the stocking behind her back. "I hate to do this," she thought, "but she's asking for it!"

As Ma reached out to seize her, she swung the stocking. The encased cake of soap cut a neat arc through the air and clipped the woman sharply on the head.

More startled than hurt, she stumbled backwards and collapsed into the bathtub.

Pausing only long enough to see that Ma was not really injured, Penny made a dash for safety. But her escape was cut off.

Sweeper Joe and Clayton the gateman were just entering the front door of the living room, armed with tools to use in taking down the washroom door.

Seeing Penny, they again blocked the exit. Desperate, she ran in the only possible direction—to the balcony overlooking the river.

The docks were directly beneath the house, and waves lapped the posts of the two-story porch. It was

at least a fifteen-foot drop and the water was shallow. But Penny had no time to calculate the risk.

Leaping to the railing of the balcony, she poised there an instant, staring down at the rocks plainly visible in the still water.

Then, as Sweeper Joe reached out to grasp her by the shoulder, she jumped.

She struck the water head foremost in a shallow dive which wrenched her back but kept her from striking the river bottom. Brushing wet hair from her eyes, she began to stroke. Her shoes were heavy as lead and impeded her.

The force of Penny's dive had carried her many feet from shore into deep water, and the river current swept her farther away from the docks. Weighted down by the shoes, she knew she did not have sufficient strength to swim to shore with them on.

Burying her face in the water, she doubled up, and groping down, untied them, one at a time.

"Those were good shoes," she thought with regret as she kicked them off and saw them settle into the river.

Penny struck out with smooth crawl strokes for the nearby pier. Her skirt kept wrapping itself about her legs. Unwilling to discard it, she tucked it high about her waist which made swimming much easier.

Reaching the pier, she was pulling herself out onto

it, when Ma Harper and the two men came running out of the house to intercept her.

"Oh! Oh!" thought Penny. "It's not going to be as easy as I assumed."

Joe ran out on the pier, while Ma and the other man separated, one starting upstream and the other down. No matter which way she turned, Penny saw that her escape would be cut off.

The river was wide, the current swift. Although an excellent swimmer, she had no desire to attempt such a contest of endurance. But there seemed no other way.

Deliberately pushing off from the pier, she swam directly away from shore. After a dozen strokes she rolled over on her back for a moment to see what was happening. Ma Harper had shouted to Joe, and the words carried plainly over the water.

"Take after her in the boat! We don't dare let her get away now! She knows too much!"

Penny had forgotten the motorboat tied up at the pier. Now as she saw Joe and Clark Clayton run toward it, her heart sank.

Though the race seemed hopeless, she flopped over onto her face again, and swam with all her strength. Going with the current, her feet churned the water behind her.

Several times, the men tried without success to start

the motorboat engine. Penny grew hopeful. Then she heard the blast as the motor caught, and knew that in just a minute the men would overtake her.

Frantically, she glanced about for help. Already late afternoon, there were no fishing boats on the river. Save for Ma Harper, who stood ready to seize her should she try to swim in to the beach, no other persons were visible on either shore. The *River Queen* apparently was at the far end of her run, hidden beyond the bend.

A hundred yards away, in shallow water, lay a large patch of tall river grass and cat-tails. Seeing it, Penny took new hope. The area was large enough to offer a temporary refuge if she could reach it! Not only would the dense mat of high grass protect her from view, but a boat would not be able to follow.

Starting to swim again, she put everything she had into each stroke. It would be pinch and go to reach the grass patch! Aware of her intention, Sweeper Joe and Clark Clayton had changed course, hoping to intercept her.

CHAPTER

19

FLIGHT

THE HIGH water grass loomed up and Penny's feet struck a muddy bottom. With the boat almost upon her, she plunged into the morass. The water came to armpit level. Pushing aside the thick stalks which wrapped themselves about her arms and body, she waded far into the patch before she paused.

Hidden by the dense growth, she could not at first see the pursuing boat. She knew, however, that it had halted at the edge of the patch, for the motor had been cut off.

And after awhile she heard voices, low spoken, but nevertheless clear, for the slightest sound carried over water.

"She's over there somewhere in the center of the patch!" one of the men muttered. "I could tell where she went by the way the grass moved. Shall we let her go?"

"No, we got to get her or she'll tell everything she

knows to old man Gandiss and the police!" the other answered.

With the motor shut off, the two men then took out paddles, and began to force the boat through the jungle of grass. Observing that they were coming straight toward her, Penny noiselessly waded on, taking every precaution not to move the stalks unnecessarily. Noting the direction of the wind, she went with it, hoping that any movement of the grass would appear to be caused by the stiff breeze.

But she hoped in vain. For suddenly Joe the Sweeper shouted hoarsely:

"There she is! Over there!" He pointed with his paddle blade.

The men pushed the boat on, smashing the grass ahead of them. In despair, Penny saw that wherever she went she was leaving a trail of trampled, broken grass behind her.

No longer trying to prevent splashes, she waded in a wide half-circle. Then quickly she back-tracked, this time making not a sound. Slipping into the dense growth just beside the trail she had made, she breathlessly waited.

The boat came into view. Taking a deep breath, Penny ducked under water. Opening her eyes, she could see the blurred, dark bottom of the craft moving slowly toward her, so close she could have reached out and touched it.

Her breath began to grow short. The boat barely seemed to move. Penny's lungs felt as if they were ready to burst, but still she remained under water.

Then the men had passed, and she dared raise her head for an instant to gulp in air. The boat reached the end of the trail through the grass that Penny herself had made. There it halted, as Sweeper Joe and his companion, realizing they had lost their quarry, debated their next move.

"She was here a minute ago!" Sweeper Joe growled. "I caught a glimpse of her clothes, and saw the grass move. Where did she go?"

"She must have doubled back."

With difficulty the men turned the boat around and rowed toward Penny again. When she dared wait no longer, she submerged again.

They passed her and she came up for air. A water snake slithered through the grass, almost touching her hand.

Startled, Penny leaped backwards, making an ugly, loud splash in the water. Slight as was the sound, it told the men where she hid. Turning in the boat, they saw her through the grass, and bore toward her again.

By this time, Penny actually enjoyed the desperate game of hide and seek, for so far, the advantage had been hers. She stood watching the boat until it came very close.

Then she dived, coming up directly underneath the

craft. Getting her shoulder squarely under one side, she raised up, and with an ease that surprised her, upset the boat.

The two men went sprawling into the water. Unable to swim, they made animal noises and clutched desperately at the grass for support. But as their feet found solid footing, they started furiously toward Penny. Taking her time, and deliberately seeking deeper water, she waded away.

"That will hold them for a few minutes," she thought gleefully. "I'll get out of this jungle now, and swim ashore."

One more the girl's hopes were rudely dashed. As she reached the edge of the grass area, she was disconcerted to see another rowboat approaching from the direction of the Harper place. With shadows deepening on the water, she could not at first distinguish the man. Then she recognized Claude Harper.

"He must have come home, and Ma sent him here to help capture me!" she thought. "If I swim out now, I'll certainly be caught."

Crouching down so that her nose was just above the water, she waited. Claude Harper rowed on, resting upon his oars when perhaps ten yards away.

"Joe!" he called.

There was an answering shout from the center of the grass patch.

"That gal's somewhere close by!" Sweeper Joe

shouted in warning. "She upset our boat. Stay where you are, and see that she doesn't slip past you!"

Thus warned, Claude Harper began to survey the grass patch intently. He looked hard at the place where Penny stood. She was certain he had seen her, but after a moment, he turned slightly, and his eyes roved on.

As she hesitated, not knowing what to do, Sweeper Joe and Clark Clayton, who had bailed out their boat, came paddling out to meet Harper. Wet and plastered with mud, they had lost one of the paddles.

"If you ain't sights!" Harper cackled upon seeing them. He slapped his thigh in glee. "You look like a couple o' stupid mud turtles!"

"Fool!" rasped Sweeper Joe. "Don't you have sense enough to figure what will happen if that girl gets away from us?"

"You ain't goin' back to no job at the Gandiss factory. Nor Clayton neither!"

"It's a lot more serious than that!" Joe snapped. He guided the boat alongside Harper's craft. "Why do you think I took that job in the first place, and spent better than two years studyin' the Gandiss factory layout? I lined up the employes we could get to go along with us, got everything organized—and now this gal has to bust up the show just as the profits begin to roll in!"

"Better pipe down," Harper warned curtly. "She

can hear you, and so can everyone else on the river."

"What's the difference?" Joe argued in disgust. "We're through. I'm gettin' out of this town tonight!"

"Me with you," added Clark Clayton. "Ever since Gandiss put detectives on the job, I figured the game was gettin' too dangerous."

Now it was Claude Harper who lost his temper. "Hold on," he said warningly. "It's all right for you guys to blow town, but what about me and the wife?"

"You can do what you please," Joe retorted.

"We got your brass cached in our basement. If the cops should find it there, we'd take the rap."

"Get rid of it."

"That's a lot easier said than done. Besides, that brass is worth a tidy sum o' money."

"Then why not sell it tonight?" Joe proposed suddenly. "If we can get it to the junkman who has a place across from the factory, he'll pay us a good price. We can complete the deal, and still get out of town before midnight."

"That's okay for you," Harper argued, "but Ma and I own property here, and we got a good business."

"It was your stupid wife's stocking business that got us into this jam!" Clark Clayton snarled.

"I ain't talkin' about that. I mean our dance hall. We clean up about a hundred bucks every Saturday night."

"You should have thought about that before you went in with us," Joe retorted. "You knew the risks you were taking. Anyway, this mess was your wife's making."

A silence fell, and then Clark Clayton said: "We ain't gettin' nowhere. We got to decide what we're goin' to do, and we got to make sure that gal don't get out o' this weed patch until we've arranged our escape."

In whispers, the men conferred. Though Penny strained her ears, she could not catch a single word. However, a plan satisfactory to the three seemed to have been formulated, for presently, the two boats separated.

Sweeper Joe and Clark Clayton paddled off, heading for the pier at the Harper's. The other man remained in his rowboat, unquestionably detailed to keep watch of the grass patch and prevent the girl's escape.

To amuse himself, he began to call out to her, though he could not see her or know where she was.

"You think you're a clever one!" he taunted. "But you jest wait! We'll get you out o' there, and when we do, you ain't goin' to like it!"

Lest a movement of the grass or a splash betray her, Penny remained perfectly still. Shadows deepened on the river for night was fast coming on. Her muscles became stiff and cramped. The wind chilled her to

the very bone, and the water which at first had not seemed unbearably cold, made her teeth chatter and dance. Each minute became an hour as the torture increased.

"I'll have to do something," she thought desperately. "I can't endure this much longer."

CHAPTER

20

A DESPERATE PLIGHT

IN THE rowboat, Claude Harper slowly patrolled the area, keeping an alert watch for the slightest movement amid the grass. Once as a crane arose from the dense growth into the darkening sky, he focused a flashlight beam on the spot.

"He's prepared to stay here half the night if necessary," Penny thought, shivering.

She could think of no means of escape. When it became completely dark, she might be able to swim away without being detected. But long exposure in cold water had weakened her, and she was none too certain of her ability to reach shore.

Her absence at the island surely must have been noticed by this time, she reasoned. Why was not a boat sent in search of her?

"I hope they don't assume I am staying with Sally for the night," she worried.

Penny's thoughts were momentarily distracted as

she heard indistinct voices from the direction of the Harper dock. Lights had been turned on in the house and basement.

"Those men are getting rid of the stolen brass," she reasoned. "If they try to sell it to Heiney, they still may be caught."

Presently the motorboat moved away from the Harper dock, its engine laboring. The craft was sunk low in the water as if from a heavy load.

The boat did not turn down stream as Penny expected. Instead, it crossed the river at right angles, stopping in mid-stream at the deepest part of the channel. There the engine was cut off.

"Now what?" thought Penny.

Claude Harper likewise seemed puzzled by the action, for he turned to stare, muttering to himself.

Though Penny could not see what the men were doing aboard the boat, she heard a loud splash as something heavy was dropped overboard.

"The fools!" Claude Harper exclaimed. "The fools!"

Another splash and still another followed. Then the boat turned and came toward the grass patch. Claude Harper hailed the men with an angry exclamation.

"You idiots! After all the risk we've taken, you dump our profits in the river!"

"Keep your shirt on!" Sweeper Joe retorted. "It was the only thing to do. Glowershick just phoned from town."

"What'd he have to report?"

"Nothing good. You know that junk shop where we arranged to sell our stuff? Where the owner offered us a higher price than any other place in town?"

"Well?"

"He was a dick, planted there by old man Gandiss himself. They've already got wind of who's in on the deal."

"Then if we try to sell the brass anywhere else, we'll be pinched."

"You're catching on, Harper."

"Have you dumped all the stuff in the river?"

"It will take two more trips at least. And there's the brass lantern to get rid of," Joe added. "As soon as the job is done, Clark and me are gettin' out of the city."

"What are Ma and me gonna do?" Harper whined. "We've got property here."

"That's up to you," Joe snapped. "If it wasn't for the gal you'd be safe enough. Seen anything of her?"

"Nary a sign."

"She may have slipped away under water. The gal swims like an eel."

"I don't think she got away. I been watchin' like a hawk."

"She's sure to spill everything, and she's seen plenty," Joe muttered. "Even though the cops don't find any evidence, they could make it plenty tough for you and the missus."

"We got to leave town," Harper admitted. "After takin' all this risk and bein' all set to cash in big, it's a dirty break. It ain't fair."

"Squawkin' won't do no good," Joe said shortly. "The question is, what are we goin' to do about the gal?"

"We got to make sure she won't carry no tales until we're safely out of town."

"Then we'll have to flush her out of this bird nest," Joe decided. "There's a way we can do it."

The manner in which she was to be caught, soon became apparent to Penny. Systematically, the men began to flatten all of the grass with their paddles and oars. Foot by foot, she retreated. Their strategy was discouragingly clear. The flattened grass no longer offered protection. Soon it all would be level with the water, and she would have no screen.

So cold that her limbs were nearly paralyzed, Penny considered giving herself up. In any case, the outcome would be the same. The only other recourse was to scream for help, and hope that someone along the shore would hear her and investigate.

With only the Harper house close by, the prospect that anyone would come to her aid was practically nil.

Angered at not finding the girl, Harper and his companions swung their paddles viciously. Penny retreated further, still reluctant to abandon freedom.

Then far downstream, she saw the *River Queen,* recognizing it by the pattern its lights made above the water. The ferry had finished its passenger run, and now apparently was coming upstream to anchor for the night.

As Penny watched the boat, she took new hope. If only she could signal Captain Barker or Sally! Unless the ferry changed course, it was almost certain to pass the grass patch. However, with the water shallow there, it would give the area a wide berth.

"Even if I shouted for help, no one aboard would hear me," she reasoned. "But I'll have to try something! I'm finished if I stay here."

Straight up the river came the *Queen.* Penny could see a man in the lighted pilot house, but no one was visible on the decks. The ferry was traveling at a rapid speed.

Penny decided to wait no longer. Creeping to the very edge of the grass, she ducked under water, and started to swim. Her strength had gone even more than she realized. Arms and legs were so stiff they barely could press against the water as she stroked. A few feet and she was forced to come to the surface.

"There she is!" shouted Sweeper Joe. Bringing the boat around, he started directly for her.

Penny swam with all the power at her command, stroking deep and fast. Not daring to look back, she could hear the dip of Sweeper Joe's oars.

Straight toward the deepest part of the channel, she propelled herself. Her crawl strokes were jerky, but they carried her along. And she had calculated well. Aided by the current, she would intercept the path of the oncoming *River Queen.*

From the water, the ferryboat looked like an immense monster as it steamed majestically up the river. Not wishing to attract attention to himself or his companions, Joe shipped his oars and temporarily gave up the chase. But he remained close by, watching alertly. Should the ferryboat fail to see or pick up Penny, he would be after her upon the instant.

Treading water, the girl shouted for help and waved an arm. Her voice was weak even to her own ears, and could not possibly carry to the pilot house of the *Queen.* Would her frantic signals be seen? The night was dark, and she was not yet in the arc of the vessel's lights.

Penny swam a few more strokes, then treaded water again, and signaled frantically. The *River Queen* did not slacken speed.

"They haven't seen me!" she thought desperately. "It's useless."

Now a new danger presented itself. The *Queen* had swerved slightly so that Penny was directly in its path. Still she had not been seen. Looming up in gigantic proportions above her, the ferry threatened to run her down.

CHAPTER

21

RESCUE

FEARFUL THAT she would be killed, Penny screamed and waved. Straight on steamed the *River Queen,* so close now that she could see Sally Barker on the starboard deck. But the girl was gazing away from her, toward Sweeper Joe and the other drifting boat.

"Help! Help!" screamed Penny in one last desperate attempt to save herself.

Her cry carried, for she saw Sally whirl around and stare intently at the dark water ahead. Then she shouted an order to her father. There came a clanging of bells, and the *Queen* swerved to port, missing Penny by a scant ten feet.

Great waves engulfed her, and she fought to keep above the surface. Her strength was practically gone. She rolled over on her back, gasping for breath.

Then she saw that the *Queen* had greatly reduced

speed and was turning back on her course. A lifeboat also was being lowered.

"They're going to pick me up!" Penny thought, nearly overcome by relief.

The next minute Sally and a sailor were pulling her into the boat.

"Why, it's Penny! And she's half drowned!" she heard her friend exclaim.

Then she knew no more.

When she opened her eyes, Penny found herself in a warm, comfortable bed. Sally stood beside her with a cup of steaming hot soup.

"You're coming around fine," she praised. "Drink this! Then you'll feel better."

Penny pulled herself up on an elbow and took a swallow of the soup. It was good and warmed her chilled body. She gulped the cupful down.

"Sally—"

"Better not try to talk too much now," Sally advised kindly. "How did you get into the water?"

The question aroused Penny, bringing back a flood of memories. She suddenly realized that she was in Sally's cabin on the *River Queen* and the ferry was moving.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"You're safe," Sally said soothingly. "You were swimming in the river. We nearly ran you down. Lucky I saw you just in time and we picked you up."

"Yes, I know," Penny agreed. "But *where* are we? Near the Harpers?"

"Oh, no, we passed their place long ago. We're far upriver."

Penny struggled up, swinging her feet out of the bunk. She saw then that she was wearing a pair of Sally's pajamas, and that her own wet garments hung over a chair.

"We must turn back!" she cried. "Tell Captain Barker, please! Oh, it's vitally important, Sally!"

Sally was maddeningly deliberate.

"Now don't get excited, Penny," she advised. "Everything will be all right."

Penny resisted as Sally tried to push her back into bed. "You don't understand!" she protested. "Sweeper Joe, Claude Harper, and Clark Clayton are expecting to make their get-away tonight. They're the ones who have been stealing brass from the Gandiss factory. It's all cached in the basement of the Harper house—or was unless they've dumped it."

"Penny, are you straight in your head? You know what you're saying?"

"I certainly do! I went there this afternoon. When I learned too much, they tried to hold me prisoner. I escaped by the river—hid in the grass patch. But they followed me there, and were about to get me, when the *River Queen* steamed by."

"I did see two small boats there. Just before you

shouted I wondered what they would be doing at this time of night."

"Sweeper Joe and Clark Clayton have been dumping the stolen brass! Unless police stop them before they dispose of it all, not a scrap of evidence will be left! All those men expect to leave town tonight!"

"Thank heavens, we have a ship-to-shore radio telephone!" Sally cried, thoroughly aroused. "I'll have Pop call the police right away!"

She bolted out the cabin door.

Every muscle and joint in Penny's body ached, but there was no time to think of her misery. Her own clothes could not be put on. Searching in Sally's wardrobe, she found a sweater and a skirt, and undergarments she needed. By the time her friend returned, she was dressed.

"Penny, you shouldn't have gotten up!" Sally protested quickly.

"I can't afford to miss the excitement," Penny grinned. "Hope you don't mind lending me some of your clothes."

"Of course not, and if you must stay up, you'll need a pair of shoes." Sally found a pair of sandals, which although too large, would serve. After Penny had put them on, she said: "Let's go to the pilot house, because I want you to tell Pop exactly what happened."

"Did you notify police?"

"Pop sent the message. It may take a little while, but police should be at the Harpers' almost anytime now."

"Those men saw me taken aboard this boat," Penny worried. "I'm afraid they'll get away before the police arrive."

The girls climbed to the pilot house where Captain Barker had just turned the wheel over to a helmsman. All members of the crew remained aboard, for with the *Queen* late on her run, there had been no opportunity as yet to put the men ashore.

"We may need all our hands tonight," Captain Barker predicted. "No telling what may develop. I have one of those feelings."

"Now Pop!" reproved Sally. "The last time you made a remark like that, we smashed a rudder. Remember?"

"Aye, I remember all too well," he rejoined grimly.

Urged by Sally, Penny related everything that had happened at the Harpers', and told of her endurance contest in the grass patch.

"We'll head back that direction and see what's doing," Captain Barker offered to satisfy her. "Maybe we'll catch sight of those rascals in their boats."

Although the *Queen* cruised slowly near the shoal area where Penny had encountered adventure, there was no sign of any small boat. The ferry crept dangerously close to the grass patch.

"Watch 'er like a cat!" Captain Barker warned the helmsman. "Cramp her! Cramp her!"

When the man did not react speedily enough, he seized the wheel and helped spin it hard down. The *Queen* responded readily, moving into deeper waters.

Satisfied that there were no small boats in the vicinity, Captain Barker, headed upstream toward the Harpers'. Across the water, lights were to be seen on both floors of the two-story river house, but so far as could be discerned, no boats were tied up at the pier or docks.

"The place isn't deserted, that's certain," Penny declared, peering into the wall of darkness. "How long should it take the police to get there?"

"If the radio message we sent was properly transmitted, they should be on their way now," the captain replied.

Sally, impatient for action, was all for taking a crew and descending upon the house and its occupants. Puffing thoughtfully at his pipe, her father considered the proposal, but shook his head.

"We have no authority to make a search," he pointed out. "Any such action would make us liable for court action. Just be patient and you'll see fireworks."

Knowing that to stand by near the Harpers' pier would warn the house occupants they were being watched, Captain Barker ordered the *Queen* to turn

downriver toward the main freight and passenger docks.

An excursion boat, the *Florence*, passed them, her railings lined with women and children who had enjoyed an all-day outing and were returning home. The steamer tied up at the Ninth Street dock and began to disgorge passengers.

Then it happened. Penny saw a sudden flash of flame which seemed to come from the hold of the excursion ship. The next instant fire shot from the portholes and began to spread.

Captain Barker gave a hoarse shout which sent a chill down her spine.

"The *Florence!*" he exclaimed huskily. "Her oil tanks must have exploded! She'll go up like matchwood, and with all those women and children aboard!"

CHAPTER

22

CAPTAIN BARKER'S COURAGE

NEVER DID a fire seem to spread so rapidly. In less than three minutes, as those aboard the *River Queen* watched in helpless horror, the *Florence* became a mass of flames from stem to stern. Terrified passengers jammed the gangplank as they tried to crowd ashore. Some of them leaped from the excursion boat's high railings to the dock below.

"Her mooring lines are ablaze!" Captain Barker shouted a moment later.

"And the freight sheds are catching afire," Penny added, observing a telltale line of flame starting from the flimsy wooden buildings along the wharf, directly back of the dock where the *Florence* had moored.

The blazing sheds worried Captain Barker far less than the fact that the mooring lines had caught fire. If the *Florence* should be cut loose from the dock, helpless women and children would be carried out onto the river in a flaming inferno.

"Why don't the fire boats get here!" Sally murmured nervously. "Oh, this is going to be a dreadful disaster if something isn't done to save those helpless people!"

At the bridge leading to the pilot house, Captain Barker stood tensely watching, his hand on the signal ropes.

"There go the mooring lines!" he shouted. "The current should bring her this way!"

As the *Florence* slowly drifted away from the blazing wharf, men and women began to leap over the railings into the dark waters.

"Man the lifeboats!" Captain Barker ordered his crew tersely. "I'm going to try to get a tow line on 'er!" He signaled the engine room, and the *River Queen* began to back rapidly toward the flaming excursion boat.

Penny and Sally ran to help launch the lifeboats. With the *River Queen* desperately short handed, they would be needed to handle oars. A fireman, an engineer, Captain Barker and a helmsman must remain at their posts, which left only three sailors to pick up passengers.

Leaping into the first boat launched, the girls rowed into the path of the blazing vessel. In its bright glow against the sky, they could see panic-stricken passengers running about the decks. An increasing number

were leaping into the water, and many could not swim.

Ignoring the cries of those who had life belts or were swimming strongly, they rapidly picked up survivors. To pull children aboard was a comparatively easy task. But many of the women were heavy, and the combined strength of the girls barely was sufficient to get them into the boat without upsetting.

Finally the lifeboat was filled beyond capacity, and they turned to land their cargo aboard the *Queen.* Only then did they see what Captain Barker intended to do.

His men had succeeded in making a line fast to the *Florence's* stern. By this time the excursion boat was a flaming inferno, with only a few passengers, the captain, and crew remaining aboard.

"Pop's going to tow the *Florence* downstream away from the freight sheds!" Sally cried. "Some of those buildings are filled with war materials awaiting shipment—coal, oil and I don't know what all! If a fire once gets going there, nothing will stop it!"

Working feverishly, the girls unloaded their passengers and went back for more. Motorboats had set out from shore, and they too aided in the rescue work. Some of the survivors were taken to land, and others were put aboard the *Queen.*

Aided by a sailor they had picked up, the girls

worked until they no longer could see bobbing heads in the swirling waters.

"We've done all we can," Sally gasped, as they helped the last of the passengers aboard the *Queen*. "The captain and most of his men will stay on the *Florence* as long as they are able."

Though exhaused by their work, the girls did what they could for those aboard. Sally distributed all the blankets she could find, and Penny helped a sailor revive two women who were unconscious from having swallowed too much water.

Suddenly there came a loud report like the crack of a pistol.

The tow line to the *Florence* had parted! Once more the excursion boat, now a roaring furnace, was adrift in mid-stream.

In an instant it was apparent to Penny what would happen. The cross-current was strong, and in a minute or two would carry the burning vessel into the wharves and sheds. When the boat struck, flying sparks would ignite the dry wood for a considerable distance, and soon the entire waterfront would be ablaze.

Though outwardly calm, Captain Barker was beset as he appraised the situation. It would not be possible to get another tow line onto the *Florence* for already her decks had become untenable for the crew. The blazing vessel was drifting rapidly.

"We could ram her," he muttered. "She might be nosed out into the channel again, and headed away from the freight docks."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous?" Sally asked anxiously. "We have at least fifty passengers aboard. In this high wind, the *Queen* would be almost certain to catch fire."

"There's nothing else to do," Captain Barker decided grimly, signaling the engine room. "The *Florence* is drifting fast, and before the fire boats can get here, half the waterfront will be ablaze. Have the passengers wet down the decks and stand by with buckets!"

Penny and Sally worked feverishly carrying out orders. The deck hose was attached, and buckets were brought from below and filled with water. All survivors who were able to help, cooperated to the fullest extent, helping wet down the decks and assisting women and children to the stern of the ferryboat.

Captain Barker had given an order for the *Queen* to move full speed ahead.

In a moment the two boats made jarring contact. Penny was thrown from her feet. Scrambling up, she saw that blazing timbers from the *Florence* had crashed directly onto the *River Queen's* deck. Sparks were falling everywhere. The ferryboat had caught fire in a dozen places.

Seizing a bucket of water, she doused out the flames

nearest her. Heat from the *Florence* was intense, and many of the men who had volunteered to help, began to retreat.

Penny and Sally stuck at their post, knowing that the lives of all depended upon extinguishing the flames quickly. Crew members of the *Florence* worked beside them with quiet, determined efficiency.

In the midst of the excitement, the final boatload of picked-up survivors had to be taken aboard. Captain Jamison, one of the last to leave the *Florence*, collapsed as he reached the deck. Severely burned, he was carried below to receive first-aid treatment.

Undaunted, Captain Barker shouted terse orders, goading the men to greater activity when the flames showed signs of getting beyond control. After the first contact with the *Florence*, only occasional sparks ignited the *Queen's* decks, but the heat was terrific. Women and children became hysterical, fearful that the ferryboat would become a flaming torch.

"The worst is over now," Sally sighed as she and Penny refilled water buckets. "Pop knows what he's doing. He's saved the waterfront."

"But this ferryboat?"

"It still may go up in smoke, but I don't think so," Sally replied calmly. "Pop is heading so that the wind will carry the flames away from us. He'll beach the *Florence* on Horseshoe shoal and let the wreck burn to the water's edge."

For the next fifteen minutes, there was no lessening of worry aboard the *River Queen.* The ferryboat clung grimly to the blazing excursion boat, losing contact at times, then picking her up again, and pushing on toward the shoal.

Fire fighting activities aboard the ferryboat became better organized; the passengers, observing that Captain Barker knew what he was about, became calm and easily managed. By the time fire boats arrived to spray the *Florence* with streams of pressured water, the situation was well in hand.

Collapsing on the deck from sheer exhaustion, Penny and Sally gazed toward the warehouses and docks on the opposite shore. Only one fire of any size was visible there.

"The fire boats will quickly put it out," Sally said confidently. "But I hate to think what would have happened if the wind and current had driven the *Florence* along those wharves."

Penny wiped her cheek and saw that her hand was covered with black soot. Sally too was a sight. She had ripped the hem from her skirt, her hair was an untidy mess, everything about her was pungent with smoke.

"Where were we when all this excitement started?" Penny asked presently. "If my memory serves me correctly, we had sent out a police call for Claude Harper and his pals to be arrested. It all seems vague

in my mind, as if it occurred a million years ago."

"Why, I had forgotten too!" Sally gasped. "I hope the police went there and caught those men before they made a get-away."

Scrambling to their feet, the girls moved to the starboard side of the *Queen* which permitted a view of the Harper house far upriver. They were startled and dismayed to see tongues of flame shooting from a window.

"That place has caught on fire too!" Sally exclaimed, then corrected herself. "But sparks from the *Florence* never could have been carried so far!"

"The house has been set afire on purpose!" Penny cried. "Oh, Sally, don't you see? It's a trick to destroy all the evidence hidden there! The Harpers intend to skip town tonight, and they're taking advantage of this fire to make it appear that destruction of the house is accidental!"

CHAPTER

23

FIRE!

SICK AT heart, the two girls realized with the Harper house aflame, their last chance of proving the guilt of the brass thieves might be gone. As they stood at the railing of the *Queen*, gloomily watching the spreading, creeping line of fire, a motorboat chugged up.

"Ahoy!" shouted a familiar voice. "Can you take aboard three more survivors? They're the very last we can find on the river."

"It's Jack!" Penny cried, recognizing his voice though unable to see his face in the dark. "After we get the passengers aboard, perhaps he'll take us up-river to the Harpers!"

The girls ran to help with the new arrivals, but sailors already had lifted them from the boat and carried them aboard the *Queen*.

"This is my last load," Jack called out. "Nearly everyone was saved. Coast Guard boats are patrol-

ling now, and if there are other survivors, they'll be taken ashore."

"Jack!" Penny called down to him.

"That you, Penny?" he demanded in astonishment. "Why didn't you come back to Shadow Island this afternoon? We've all been worried about you!"

"It's a long story, and there's no time to tell it now! Jack, will you take us to the Harpers' in your motorboat?"

"Now?"

"Yes, the house is on fire."

Helping the girls into the boat, Jack turned to gaze upstream. "That's strange!" he exclaimed. "How could sparks from the *Florence* have carried so far?"

"The answer is, they didn't," Penny said grimly. "The house was set afire on purpose. Just get us to the pier as quickly as you can."

Somewhere along the shore a big city clock struck the hour of midnight. The young people did not notice. As the boat raced over the water, bouncing as it struck each high wave, they discussed what had happened just prior to the outbreak of fire aboard the *Florence*.

"I know part of the stolen brass was dumped into the river by Sweeper Joe," Penny revealed excitedly. "The remainder was locked in the basement of the Harper house the last I knew. And I'm satisfied the brass lantern taken from the *Queen* by Adam Glower-

shick is among the loot. All the thieves expect to skip town tonight. Probably they're gone by this time."

Beaching the boat some distance from the burning house, the three young people ran up the slope. Firemen had not yet reached the scene, and the few persons who had gathered, were watching the flames but making no effort to battle them.

"It's a hopeless proposition," Jack commented. "This far from the city, there's no water pressure. The house will burn to the ground."

"And all the evidence with it," Penny added gloomily. "What miserable luck!"

No boats were tied up at the dock, nor was there any sign of the Harpers or their friends in the crowd. Obviously, the entire party had fled.

"Isn't there some place where we can telephone the police?" Penny suggested impatiently. "If they act quickly, these men still may be caught. They can't be very far away."

"The nearest house is up the beach about an eighth of a mile," Jack informed. "Maybe we can telephone from there."

"You two go," Sally said casually. "I want to stay here."

At the moment, Jack and Penny, intent only upon their mission, thought nothing about the remark. Following the paved road which made walking easy, they hastened as fast as they could.

"Jack," Penny said, puffing to keep pace with him. "There's something I want to ask you."

"Shoot!"

"Why have you felt so friendly toward that crook, Glowershick?"

Jack's eyebrows jerked upward and he gave a snort of disgust. "Whatever gave you that crazy idea?"

"Well, he came to the island, and you borrowed money from me to give him—"

"So you recognized him that day?"

"Yes," Penny answered quietly. "You tried to hide his identity, so I said nothing more. I kept thinking you would explain."

"I'm prepared to pay you what I owe, Penny."

"Oh, Jack, it's not the money. Don't you understand—"

"You think I've had a finger in lifting the brass lantern from the *Queen*," Jack said stiffly.

"Gracious, no! But shouldn't you explain?"

Jack was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Thanks, Penny, for having a little faith in me. I know I've been an awful sap."

"Suppose you tell me all about it."

"There's nothing to tell. I went to the Harpers a number of times—attended their dances, and spent a lot of money. I got into debt to that fellow Glowershick and he pressed me for it."

"There was nothing more to it?"

"Not a thing, except that I didn't want my folks to hear about it. That's why I pretended I didn't know Glowershick. I was afraid you would tell them. Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, I do, Jack. I'm so relieved. And the jitterbug girl at Harpers'—"

"Oh, *her!*" Jack said scornfully. "She was a stupid thing, and I don't see how I stood her silly chatter. Most of the money I borrowed from Glowershick was spent on her. As I've said, I was a complete chump."

Reaching a house some distance back from the river, they found the owner at home, and were given permission to telephone the police. Jack was promised by an inspector that all police cruisers would be ordered to watch for the escaped brass thieves. Railroad terminals, bus depots and all roads leading from the city would be guarded.

"Watch the riverfront too," Jack urged. "The men may have gone by boat to Tate's Beach, intending to catch a train from there."

Satisfied they had done everything possible, Penny and Jack hastened back to the Harpers'. The sky was tinted pink and flames now shot from the roof of the house. A large crowd had gathered, and there was excited talk and gesturing.

"Something's wrong!" Penny observed anxiously.

Pushing through the crowd, they sought vainly to find Sally.

A woman was talking excitedly, pointed toward the flaming building.

"I tell you, I saw a girl run in there only a few minutes ago!" she insisted. "And she didn't come out! She must be in there now!"

The words shocked Penny and Jack as the same thought came to them. Could it be that reckless Sally had ventured into the basement of the house, hoping to recover the brass lantern or other evidence which would incriminate the thieves?

"She acted funny when we left her here," Penny whispered in horror. "Oh, Jack! If she's inside the building—"

Pushing through the crowd, she grasped the arm of the woman who was talking. "Who was the girl? What was she wearing?" she demanded tensely.

"A blue sweater," the woman recalled. "Her hair was flying wild and her face was streaked with dirt as if she'd already been in the fire. I thought maybe she lived here."

"It was Sally," Penny murmured, her heart sinking to her shoe tops. "Why hasn't someone brought her out?"

"No human being could get into that house now," declared a man who stood close by. "The firemen aren't here yet. Anyway, we ain't sure there's anyone inside."

"I saw the girl run in, I tell you!" the woman insisted.

To debate over such a vital matter infuriated Penny and Jack. Sally was nowhere in the crowd and they were convinced she had entered the blazing building. Flames were blowing from some of the lower windows and smoke was dense. It was obvious that no man present was willing to risk his life to ascertain if the girl were inside.

"She must have tried to reach the basement!" Penny cried. "Oh, Jack, we've got to bring her out!"

Nodding grimly, Jack stripped off his coat. Throwing it over his head as a shield, he darted into the burning building. Penny, close at his heels, had no protection.

Inside the house, smoke was so black they could not see three feet ahead. Choking, gasping for breath, they groped their way through the living room to the kitchen. Penny jerked open the door leading into the cellar.

Flames roared into her face. The entire basement was an inferno of heat. No human being could descend the stairs and return. If Sally were below, she was beyond help.

Closing the door, Penny staggered backwards. Her head was spinning and she could not get her breath.

"It's no use!" Jack shouted in her ear. "We've got

to get out of here! The walls or floor may collapse."

Clutching Penny's arm, he pulled her along. In the black smoke swirling about them, they missed the kitchen door.

Frantically, they crept along a scorching hot wall, seeking to find an exit.

Then Penny stumbled over an object on the floor and fell. As she tried to get up, her hand touched something soft and yielding. A body lay sprawled in a heap beside her on the floor.

"It's Sally!" she cried. "Oh, Jack, help me get her up!"

CHAPTER

24

DREDGING THE RIVER

SALLY MOANED softly but did not stir as Penny tried to pull her to a sitting position. The heat now was almost unbearably intense, with flying brands dropping everywhere. But near the floor, the air was better, and Penny drew it in by deep gulps.

Jack's groping hand encountered the sink. Soaking his coat with water from one of the taps, he gave it to Penny to protect her head and shoulders.

"Help me get Sally onto my back in a Fireman's carry," he gasped. "We can make it."

The confidence in Jack's voice gave Penny new courage and strength. As he knelt down on the floor, she dragged Sally onto his back. Holding the inert body high on his shoulders, he staggered across the kitchen.

Penny guided him to the door. Flames had eaten into the living room, and a small portion of the floor

had fallen through. To reach the exit was impossible.

"A window!" Jack directed.

Penny could see none, so dense was the smoke, but she remembered how the room had been laid out, and pulled Jack to an outer wall. Her exploring hand encountered a window sill, but she could not get the sash up.

In desperation, she kicked out the glass. A rush of cool, sweet air struck her face. Filling her lungs, she turned to help Jack with his burden. Before she could grasp him, he sagged slowly to the floor.

Thrusting her head through the broken window, Penny shouted for help.

Willing hands lifted her to safety, and two men climbed through the window to bring out Jack and Sally. Both were carried some distance from the blazing building to an automobile where they were revived.

However, Sally was in need of medical attention. Hair and eyebrows had been singed half away, and more serious, her hands and arms were severely burned. Jack and Penny rode with her to the hospital when the ambulance finally came.

Not until hours later, after Captain Barker had been summoned, did Sally know anyone. Heavily bandaged, with her father, Jack, and Penny at her bedside, she opened her eyes and gave them a half-hearted grin.

"The *Florence?*" she whispered.

"Safely beached on a shoal," Captain Barker assured her tenderly. "There's nothing to worry about. All the passengers have been taken to hospitals or to their homes. A preliminary check has shown only one man lost, an engineer who was trapped at his post when the explosion occurred aboard the *Florence*."

"Pop, you were marvelous," Sally whispered. "You saved the waterfront."

"And nearly lost a daughter. Sally, why did you try to get into that burning building?"

Sally drew a deep, tired sigh.

"Never mind," said Penny kindly. "We know why you went in—it was to find the brass lantern."

Sally nodded. "When I got to the basement, flames were shooting up everywhere," she recalled with a shudder. "I realized then that I couldn't possibly find the lantern or anything else. I tried to get back, but smoke was everywhere. That was the last I remembered."

"It was Jack who saved you," Penny said, but he cut in to insist that the credit belonged to her rather than to him.

In the midst of a good-natured argument over the subject, a nurse came to say that Penny and Jack both were wanted on the telephone.

"The police department calling," she explained.

They were down the hall in a flash to take the call. Captain Brown of the city police force informed them

they were wanted immediately at police headquarters to identify Sweeper Joe, the Harpers, and Clark Clayton who had been arrested at the railroad station. Adam Glowershick also had been taken into custody.

At headquarters fifteen minutes later, the young people found Mr. Gandiss, Penny's father, and Heiney Growski already there. Questioned by police, the young people revealed everything they knew about the case.

"We can hold these men for a while," Chief Bailey promised Mr. Gandiss, "but to make charges stick, we'll have to have more evidence."

Penny had told of the cache of brass in the Harper basement, and also of seeing Sweeper Joe and Clark Clayton dump much of the loot in the river. She was assured that the ruins of the house would be searched in the morning and that a dredge would be assigned to try to locate the brass which had been thrown overboard into the deepest part of the channel.

Heiney Growski produced records he had kept, showing a list of Gandiss factory employes known to be implicated in the plot.

"Most of the persons involved are new employes who smuggled small pieces of brass out of the factory and turned them over to Sweeper Joe for pin money," he revealed. "The leaders are Joe, Clayton, and Glowershick. With them behind bars, the ring will dissolve."

"There's one thing I want to know," Penny declared feelingly. "Who planted the brass in Sally's locker while she was working at the factory?"

No one could answer the question at the moment, but the following day, after police had repeatedly questioned the prisoners, the entire story became known. Sweeper Joe, the real instigator of the plot, had slipped into the locker room himself, and had placed the incriminating piece of evidence in Sally's locker, using a master key. He had disliked her because several times she had resented his attempts to become friendly.

Although police had obtained signed confessions, tangible evidence also was needed, for as Chief Bailey pointed out to Mr. Gandiss, the men might repudiate their statements when they appeared in court. Accordingly, police squads were sent to the Harpers' to search the ashes for evidence, and also to the river to supervise dredging operations.

Throughout the day, between trips to the hospital to see Sally, Jack and Penny watched the dredge boat make its trips back and forth over the area where the loot had been dropped.

"I hope I wasn't mistaken in the location," Penny remarked anxiously as the vessel made repeated excursions without success. "After all, the night was dark, and I had no way of taking accurate bearings."

Across the river and barely visible, the blackened,

smoking skeleton of the *Florence* lay stranded on a sandbar. Throughout the night, a fireboat had steadily pumped water into the burning vessel, but even so, fires had not been entirely extinguished.

Morning papers had carried the encouraging information that there was only one known casualty as a result of the disaster. That many lives had not been lost was credited entirely to the courageous action of Captain Barker.

Becoming weary of watching the monotonous dredging operations, Jack and Penny joined a throng of curious bystanders at the Harper property. Police had taken complete charge and were raking the smoldering ruins.

"Find anything?" Jack asked a policeman he knew.

The man pointed to a small heap of charred metal which had been taken from the basement. There were many pieces of brass, but the missing lantern was not to be found in the pile.

However, from a member of the arson squad, they learned that enough evidence had been found to prove conclusively that the fire had been started with gasoline.

"Ma Harper spilled the whole story," one of the policemen related. "She and her husband were fairly straight until they became mixed up with Sweeper Joe, who has a police record of long standing. Ma had a black market business in silk stockings that

didn't amount to much. So far as we've been able to learn, she and a taxi driver whom we've caught, were the only ones involved. Her husband and the other men considered the stocking racket small potatoes for them."

After talking with the policemen for awhile, the young people wandered down to the river's edge to see how dredging operations progressed.

"They're hauling something out of the water now!" Jack exclaimed. "By George! It looks like brass to me!"

Finding a boat tied up at the dock, they borrowed it and rowed rapidly out to the dredge. There they saw that some of the metal which Sweeper Joe had dumped, had indeed been recovered.

Prodding in the muddy pile in the bottom of the dredge net, Penny uttered a little scream of joy. "The brass lantern is here, Jack! What wonderful luck!"

Seizing the slime-covered object, she washed it in the river. "Let's take it straight to Sally at the hospital!" she urged.

Because the lantern would be important evidence in the case against Glowershick, police aboard the dredge were unwilling for it to be removed. However, the young people carried the news to Sally.

"Oh, I'm so glad the lantern has been recovered!" she cried happily. "Jack, you'll win it in the race Friday."

Jack and Penny exchanged a quick, stricken glance. Temporarily, they had forgotten the race and all it meant to Sally. With her hands bandaged from painful burns, she never would be able to compete.

"We'll postpone the race," Jack said gruffly. "It would be no competition if we held it without you."

"Nonsense," replied Sally. "It will be weeks before I can use my hands well, so it would be stupid to postpone the race that long. Fortunately, the doctor says I may leave the hospital tomorrow, and I'll not be scarred."

"If you can't race, I won't either," declared Jack stubbornly.

"Jack, you must!" Agitated, Sally raised herself on an elbow. "I'd feel dreadful if you didn't compete. The race has meant everything to you."

"Not any more. Winning doesn't seem important now. I'll not sail in the race unless the *Cat's Paw* is entered, and that's final!"

"Oh, Jack, you're such an old mule!" Sally tossed her head impatiently on the pillow. Then she grinned. "If my *Cat* is in the race, you'll sail?"

"Sure," he agreed, suspecting no trick.

Sally laughed gleefully. "Then it's settled! Penny will represent me in the race!"

"I'll do what?" demanded Penny.

"You'll skipper the boat in my stead!"

"But I lack experience."

"You'll win the trophy easily," chuckled Sally. "Why, the *Cat's Paw* is by far the fastest boat on the river."

"Says who?" demanded Jack, but without his old fire.

"But I couldn't race alone," said Penny, decidedly worried. "Sally, would you be able to ride along as adviser and captain bold?"

"I certainly would jump at the chance if the doctor would give permission. Oh, Penny, if only he would!"

"The race isn't until Friday," Jack said encouragingly. "You can make it, Sally."

The girl pulled herself to a sitting posture, staring at her bandaged hands.

"Yes, I can," she agreed with quiet finality. "Why, I feel better already. Even if I have to be carried to the dock in a wheel chair, I'll be in that race!"

CHAPTER

25

THE RACE

A MID-AFTERNOON sun beat down upon the wharves as a group of sailboats tacked slowly toward the starting line for the annual Hat Island trophy race. The shores were lined with spectators, and from the clubhouse where a band played, music carried over the water.

At the tiller of the *Cat's Paw,* Penny, in white blouse and slacks, hair bound tightly to keep it from blowing, sat nervous and tense. Sally, lounging on a cushion in the bow, seemed thoroughly relaxed. Though her arms remained in bandages, otherwise she had completely recovered from her unpleasant experience.

"Isn't the wind dying?" Penny asked anxiously. "Oh, Sally, I was hoping we'd have a good stiff breeze for the race! Handicapped as we are—"

"We're not handicapped," Sally corrected. "Of course, I can't handle the ropes or do much to help,

but we have a wonderful boat that will prove more than a match for Jack's *Spindrift*."

"You're only saying that to give me confidence."

"No, I'm not," Sally denied, turning to study the group of racing boats. "We'll win the trophy! Just wait and see."

"If we do, it will be because of your brain and my brawn," Penny chuckled. "I'll admit I'm scared silly. I never was in an important race before."

Conversation ceased, for the boats now were bunching close to the starting line, maneuvering for position. Jack drifted by in the *Spindrift*, raising his hand in friendly greeting. As he passed, he actually glanced anxiously toward Sally, as if worried lest the girl overtax herself.

"I hope he doesn't try to throw the race just to be gallant," Penny thought. "But I don't believe he will, for then the victory would be a hollow one."

The change apparent in Jack so amazed Penny that she had to pinch herself to realize it was true. Since the night of the fire, he had visited Sally every day. In a brief span of hours, he had grown from a selfish, arrogant youth into a steady, dependable man. And it now was evident to everyone that he liked Sally in more than a friendly way.

"Better come about now, Penny," Sally broke in upon her thoughts. "Head for the starting line. The signal should be given any minute now."

The boats started in a close, tight group. Jack was over the line first, but with *Cat's Paw* directly behind.

In the first leg of the race, the two boats kept fairly even, with the others lagging. As the initial marker was rounded, there was a noticeable fall-off in the wind.

"It's going to be a drifting race," Sally confirmed, raising troubled eyes to the wrinkled sail. "We're barely drawing now and Jack's boat has the edge in a calm."

The *Spindrift* skimmed merrily along, now in the lead by many yards. Though Penny held the tiller delicately, taking advantage of every breath of wind, the distance between the two boats rapidly increased.

"We're out of it," she sighed. "We can't hope to overtake Jack now."

Sally nodded gloomily. Shading her eyes against the glare of the sun, she gazed across the river, studying the triangular course. Far off-shore, well beyond the line the *Spindrift* and their own boat was taking, the surface of the water appeared rippled. Ahead of them there was only a smooth surface.

"Penny," she said quietly. "I believe there's more breeze out there."

Penny nodded and headed the *Cat's Paw* on the longer course out into the river. To many spectators ashore it appeared that the girls deliberately had abandoned the race, but aboard the *River Queen*, Captain

Barker grinned proudly at his guests, Mr. Parker, and Mr. and Mrs. Gandiss.

"Those gals are using their heads!" he praised. "Well, Mr. Gandiss, it looks as if the Barkers will keep the trophy another year!"

"The race isn't over yet," Mr. Gandiss rumbled goodnaturedly.

Aboard the *Cat's Paw*, Penny and Sally were none too jubilant. Although sails curved with wind and they were footing much faster than the other boats, the course they had chosen would force them to sail a much longer distance. Could they cross the finish line ahead of the *Spindrift?*

"Shouldn't we turn now?" Penny asked impatiently. "Jack's so much closer than we."

"Not yet," Sally said calmly. "We must make it in one long tack. He will be forced to make several. That's our only chance. If we misjudge the distance, we're sunk."

Tensely, they watched the moving line of boats close along shore. The *Spindrift* seemed almost at the finish line, though her sails barely were drawing and she moved through the water at a snail's pace.

Again Penny glanced anxiously at her companion.

"Now!" Sally gave the signal.

Instantly Penny swung the *Cat's Paw* onto the homeward tack. Every inch of her sails drawing, she swept toward the finish line.

"We're so much farther away than the *Spindrift*," Penny groaned, crouching low so that her body would not deflect the wind. "Oh, Sally, will we make it?"

"Can't tell yet. It will be nip and tuck. But if we can keep this breeze—"

The wind held, and the *Cat's Paw*, sailing to windward of the finish line, moved along faster and faster. On the other hand, the *Spindrift* was forced to make several short tacks, losing distance each time. The boats drew even.

Suddenly Sally relaxed, and slumped down on the cushions.

"Just hold the old girl steady on her course," she grinned. "That brass lantern is the same as ours!"

"Then we'll win?"

"We can't lose now unless some disaster should overtake us."

Even as Sally spoke, boat whistles began to toot. Sailing experts nodded their heads in a pleased way, for it was a race to their liking.

A minute later, sweeping in like a house afire, the *Cat's Paw* crossed the finish line well in advance of the *Spindrift*. Jack's boat placed second with other craft far behind.

Friendly hands assisted the girls ashore where they were spirited away to the clubhouse for rest and refreshments. As everyone crowded about to congratulate them upon victory, Jack joined the throng.

"It was a dandy race," he said with sincerity. "I tried hard to win, but you outsmarted me."

"Why, Jack!" teased Sally. "Imagine admitting a thing like that!"

"Now don't try to rub it in," he pleaded. "I know I've been an awful heel. You probably won't believe me, but I'm sorry about the way I acted—"

"For goodness sakes, don't apologize," Sally cut him short. "I enjoyed every one of those squabbles we had. I hope we have a lot more of them."

"We probably will," Jack warned, "because I expect to be underfoot quite a bit of the time."

Later in the afternoon, the brass lantern which had been turned over to the club by the police, was formally presented to Sally. She was warned however, that the trophy would have to be returned later for use in court as evidence against Adam Glowershick.

The nicest surprise of all was yet to come. Captain Barker was requested by a committee chairman to kindly step forward into full view of the spectators.

"Now what's this?" he rumbled, edging away.

But he could not escape. Speaking into a loudspeaker, the committee chairman informed the captain and delighted spectators, that in appreciation of what he had done to save the waterfront, a thousand dollar purse had been raised. Mr. Gandiss, whose factory certainly would have faced destruction had wharves caught fire, had contributed half the sum himself.

"Why, beaching the *Florence* was nothing," the captain protested, deeply embarrassed. "I can repair the damage done to the *Queen* with less than a hundred dollars."

"The money is yours, and you must keep it," he was told. "You must have a use for it."

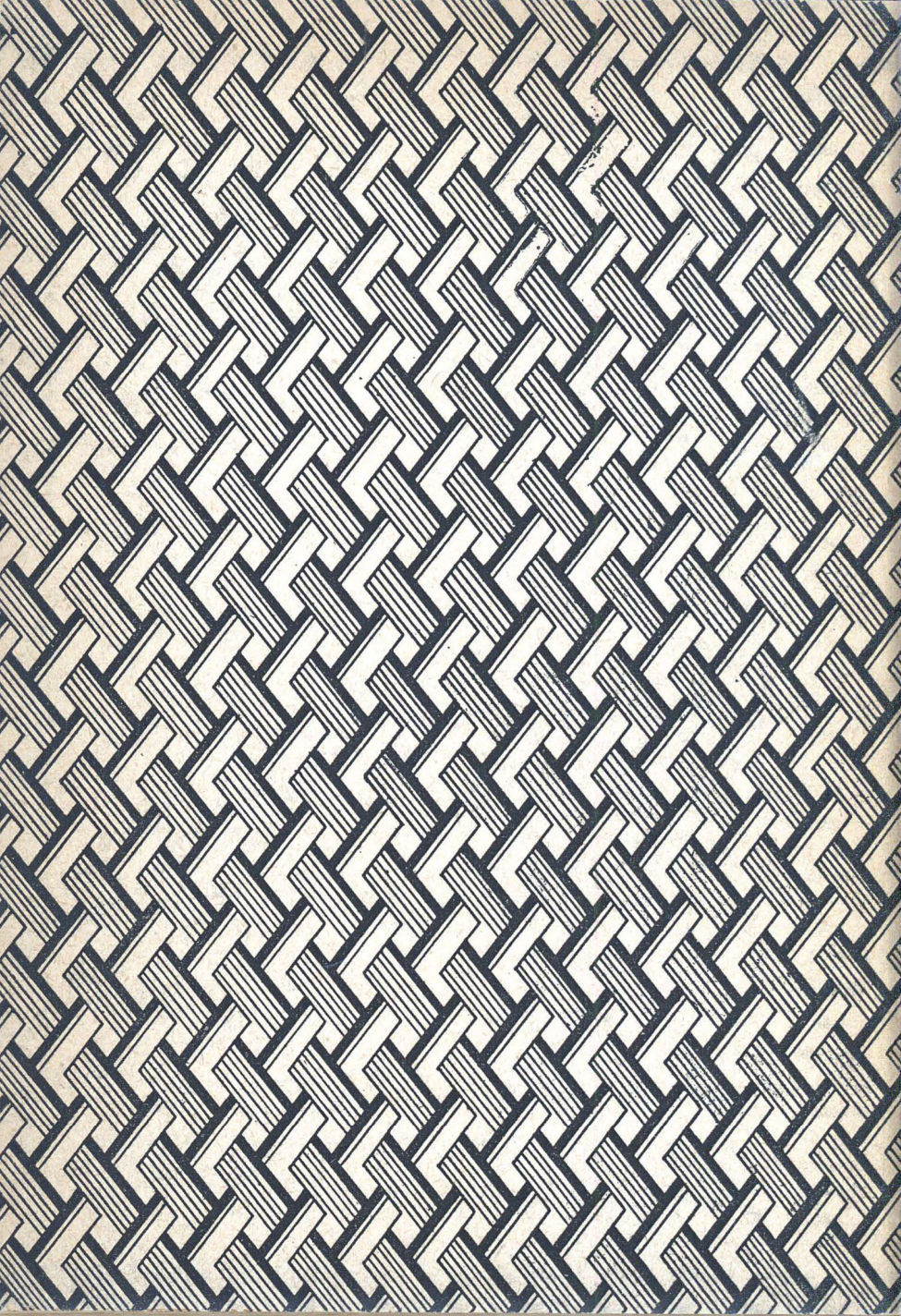
"I have that," Captain Barker admitted, winking at his daughter. "There's a certain young lady of my acquaintance who has been hankerin' to go away to college."

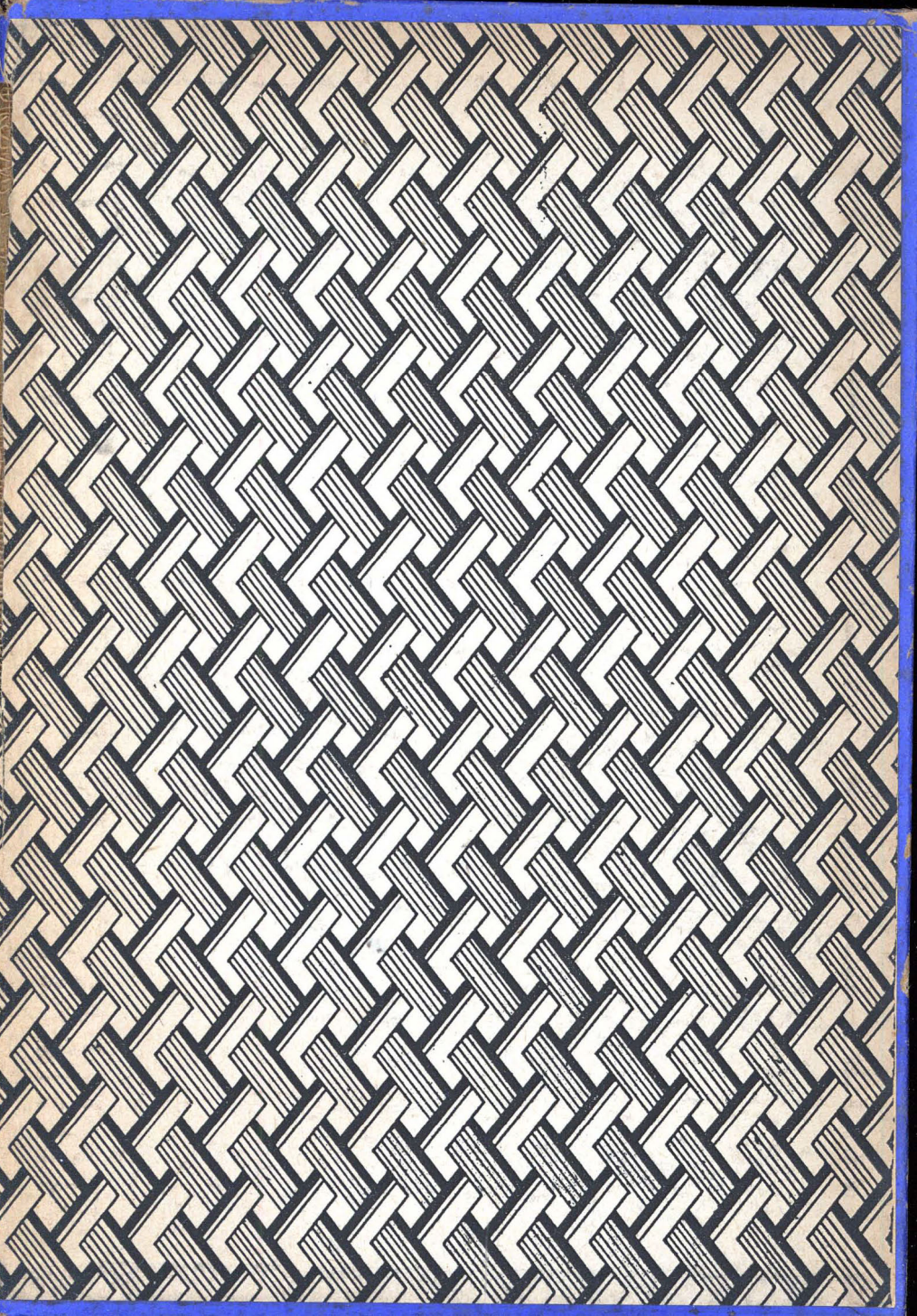
"Oh, Pop." Sally's eyes danced. "How wonderful! I know where I want to go too!"

"So you've been studying the school catalogues?" her father teased.

Sally shook her head. Reaching for Penny's hand, she drew her close.

"I don't need a catalogue," she laughed. "I only know I'm scheduled for the same place Penny selects! She's been my good luck star, and I'll set my future course by her!"





Guilt of the BRASS THIEVES

WIRT

CUPPLES & LEON CO